

## **Churches European Rural Network Visit to Romania, October 2011 Andrew Bowden**

### **The Visit**

We are extremely grateful to Rudi Job for masterminding our visit: without him it would not have been possible. Also, to a remarkable establishment, the Evangelical Academy at Sibiu, whose staff organised our programme. The Academy is very well equipped with excellent accommodation, and it is good to hear that it will host the next meeting of IRCA – Europe in 2012.

With the blessing of IRCA – Europe (International Rural Churches Association – Europe) - Rudi Job and I arranged for a small group to visit rural Romania between 20 and 25 October 2011. The visit was hosted by Dietrich Galter, President of the Academy of Neppendorf, Sibiu.

The programme included:

- A journey to the ruins of the Cistercian monastery at Kerz (Carta) where we met the parish priest Michael Refer and a representative of the agricultural society.
- A visit to the summer residence of Baron Samuel von Bruckenthal in Freck which is being restored as a tourist attraction.
- A visit to Michelsberg to a visit to meet the entrepreneur Michael Henning. (Subject: My village before and now). Meal on a farm.
- Journey to Mediasch, Pretai and Biertan to see various rural projects linked with local churches.
- Visit to the old mill in Holzmengen (nice name: literally 'loads of wood!')
- A meeting with Jochen Cotaru in respect of the development project at Harbachtal, the project Natura 2000, and certain individual projects in the village (for example restoration of the old village mill).
- A visit to the service in a village parish (Grossau or Reussdoerfchen). After the service a conversation with representatives of the parish and their work with the Gipsy community.
- A visit to the 'shepherd-village' Sibieli, the museum of icons 'Zosim Oancea'.
- A meeting with a representative of the regional agency for tourism, concentrating on possibilities for developing tourism in rural areas.

### **General Thoughts**

#### *The Vital Importance of History*

Especially in a new 'composite' national state such as Romania. Only in the context of history can one understand what happens now, and what might be possible in the future.

Transylvania is really a region/country in its own right, combining native Hungarians (north), Saxons (south) and Romanians. For most of its history it has been part of the Hungarian or Austro-Hungarian Empire. Saxons were brought in around 1160 and have been there ever since. They speak German

and their culture was German, but they had in effect over 1000 years become 'Transylvanians'.

We were told that the influence of the historian von Ranke (1860) and the birth of modern Germany (1870) and the fact that the 'leaders' of the Saxons tended to study in Germany together had the effect of 'converting' the 'Transylvanian Saxons' into 'nationalist Germans'. This had disastrous results in the Second World War, when the Saxons sided with Germany. When Germany lost the war, the Romanian and communist parties took their revenge. When the communists took over in 1945 they deported most of the Saxon leaders to prison Gulags, and authorised the confiscation of Saxon property by local people.

Not surprisingly, when in 1992 the Saxons had the opportunity to emigrate to Germany, most of them took it, leaving behind their village homes. They now make up only one per cent of the population of Transylvania.

Michael at Michelsberg emphasised that the above events were driven by political decisions taken at national level. The relations between Romanians and Saxons in villages were not normally so extreme. After 1950 the ethnic groups got on reasonably well together. But land was nationalised and farming collectivised and this effectively destroyed the Saxon agricultural culture. So the net result was that from 1992 many Saxons abandoned their village homes, which were taken over by Gypsy families.

So what we see today in the 'Saxon' villages is not a tightly organised agricultural society with its roots in German culture, but a Romanian/Gypsy population, many of whom have no agricultural expertise, alongside a very small number of Saxons who have for one reason or another stayed behind.

In Michael's view, the 'Saxon heritage' is therefore as much a myth/dream as, for instance, the 'Cotswold Village Heritage'. However 'Heritage Dreams' do have economic potential. German schools remain and teaching in German for Romanians is still very 'popular'. Buildings in villages and churches remain. They can be converted and used for training/small industry. A number of German ex-Saxons are now buying second homes in the old Saxon towns/villages. The villages and landscape have major tourist potential.

It was fascinating to listen to the story of a minority group, still in some ways 'defensive', in a new national situation. It was significant that Michael from Michaelsberg saw the EU as a vital protection for minorities.

### *The Future of the Evangelical Church*

The Church has to operate in a situation where most members have left the country, but Lutherans are not allowed to proselytise because of ecumenical agreements.

The Evangelical churches have an overwhelming heritage of buildings which they say the Orthodox majority in the villages don't want. Like us in the UK,

they want to develop the churches as 'museums of local heritage', and to convert and use the school buildings and vicarages for skill training. We saw two examples.

Our one visit to a service in a local church confirmed our fears that the Saxons who remain are anchored in the past. It's not unlike church life in many small villages in rural UK.

However, a number of individuals – and most notably the Academy of Sibiu - show that the Holy Spirit is blowing new life into old bones. It's just that it all requires a huge cultural shift.

### *Tourism*

Transylvania has plenty to attract the tourist: hiking and mountaineering (but this needs good local maps and German quality way-marking); towns with full facilities (Sibiu certainly provides this, but Cluj doesn't); heritage sites (Sighisoara, Biertan, Viscri – excellent - but others need a lot better roads, restaurants and small shops); fortified churches (but these need millions spent on them to make a visit feel peaceful and revitalising).

In general, they are half way there – with certain excellent stops such as Biertan – but much of the rest very grotty indeed. In short, they would appeal to people who like to rough it – but not to the older western tourist. At the moment one would certainly need the daily support of a tour-operator for the once-off visitor to 'risk rural Romania'.

### *Agriculture*

We found this very complicated. We were told that in the valley of the Danube there are already large thriving farms (many owned by foreign companies).

In Transylvania, with its tradition of small farming, we saw large areas of uncultivated land and sensed a general demoralisation. We were told that a lot of this has to do with: the collapse of communist collectives; the way in which the land was returned to the original peasant owners; the land-ownership and taxation laws; the exodus of the young to the towns; the departure of the Saxons who had provided determined farming leadership in the past; the lack of any marketing structure for local food. Finally, the fact that there is no agricultural college or school in the area. Amazing.

Many village people cultivate a hectare or so of land for themselves at weekends but beyond this can't see the point of producing a surplus that they can't then sell at a profit.

The baker at Hosman is showing how things can be turned round – as is Michael at Michelsberg; and it was fascinating to see the power for change of one determined individual – but every village needs one.

It has to be said that a (very leisurely!) train journey from Sibiu to Cluj via Sighisoara suggested that in the Hungarian/Romanian part of Transylvania the land is much better cultivated. Farm buildings were more up-together. There were largish herds of sheep and cattle. A large wine-growing area near Blaj and towards Cluj; even the hill county was being ploughed for next season.

We were told frequently (by German speakers!) that Romanians just don't like hard work and that Gypsies don't know how to farm. But perhaps it would be truer to say that, as in most other ex-communist countries, it takes a generation at least for villages and agriculture to recover from the dead hand of collectivisation: and the experience of 50 years when the state not only thought for you, but also provided for you and managed you. Communism did not encourage an entrepreneurial mind-set!

There is a more detailed report available, but I hope the above gives some sense of how worthwhile we found the visit, and how it helped us to see ourselves in a new light.

Andrew Bowden is a member of the International Rural Churches Association – Europe (IRCA-Europe). They aim to bring together rural Christians to meet, to share experiences and to understand and pray for each other. ([www.irca.net.nz/europe](http://www.irca.net.nz/europe)) He is also a member of the Faith in Europe Committee