

Unitarian Roots:
Sixteenth Century Transylvanian Heritage of King's Chapel
1517-1600

In 1517, during a period of tumultuous events, Martin Luther posted his 95 theses opposing the excesses and corruptions of the dominant Roman Catholic Church and leading to the Reformation which produced new protestant faiths – Lutherans, Calvinists, and Anabaptists. But, there were other theologians who went further than the Wittenberg reformer, resulting in what George Hunston Williams called the Radical Reformation. Among these reformers were the anti-Trinitarians who spawned the Unitarian movement in Poland and Transylvania. They were variously called Arians, Socinians, and Polish Brethren, but not Unitarians until 1600 in Transylvania, a semi-independent state under the protection of the Habsburgs. Today's Unitarians owe much credit to some major heretics of the 16th century.

1531 – Michael Servetus, a respected physician with credentials as a theologian who fled the inquisition in Spain, published *On the Errors of the Trinity* in 1531 which became the treatise for anti-Trinitarian thinkers and advanced the notions of the oneness of God and religious tolerance. In 1553, Servetus was burned at the stake by the Protestant-Calvinists in Geneva with his theological opus, *The Restitution of Christianity*, tied to his thigh. Some years later, he was burned in effigy by the Roman Catholics for his views. He was the most famous of the anti-Trinitarians of the sixteenth century.

1539 – Faustus Socinus was born in Siena (Tuscany), Italy, where he came under the influence of the writings of his uncle, Laelius Socinus on individual freedom in religious matters and professions of faith. He left home and went to the centers of religious reformers, including Zurich and Basel, where he studied and wrote several major treatises, the most important being *On Jesus Christ the Savior*. He then went to the Polish city of Kraków which protected dissidents and accepted the toleration of faith including a community of Italian refugees. He became the main leader of the Polish Brethren, the Socinian Church, advancing anti-Trinitarianism and laying the groundwork for the Unitarian beliefs of reason and freedom of conscience. He also traveled to Kolozsvár, where he met Francis David. Socinus was a prolific theoretician and writer of treatises including major contributions to the Racovian community's catechism which defined Unitarian theology. Unfortunately, toleration in Poland deteriorated and Socinus drew Catholic opposition, his property was confiscated, his books and papers were burned, he was dragged half-clothed to city hall and condemned as a heretic, but he was rescued by a sympathetic university professor. Socinus can be considered a martyr for religious freedom.

1568 – Dávid Ferenc (Francis David), a prominent Catholic who was greatly influenced by Erasmus and Servetus, studied at Wittenberg and became a preacher of the reformation in Kolozsvár, the cultural and religious center of Transylvania. In 1568, after many debates promulgating a biblical and humanistic view in radical conflict with reformation leaders, he convinced King John Sigismund during a lengthy synod in Torda to issue the Edict of Toleration proclaiming freedom of religion and conscience, a decision unparalleled in Europe and laying the foundation for Unitarianism in Transylvania. David returned to Kolozsvár where he is said to have stood on a large rock and preached to thousands, many of whom were persuaded to become followers. After the King's death, however, tolerance was short-lived, Catholicism became dominant, and Francis David was condemned by his fellow clergy as a heretic and imprisoned for life in a mountaintop fortress where he died.

When Transylvania fell under the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the 17th century, Unitarians were persecuted but kept their faith alive in small towns and mountain communities. It would be two hundred years later, in 1848 after the revolution with the Hungarians, that Unitarianism became legal again in Transylvania. By this time, there were Unitarian movements in England and America, both countries with histories of religious intolerance. In England, John Biddle had laid the foundation in the 17th century. And Joseph Priestly, the scientist known for the discovery of oxygen, advanced the movement both in England and in America, helping to establish the first Unitarian Church in Philadelphia in the 1790s. King's Chapel, of course, had already become the first Unitarian Church under its minister, James Freeman, a Socinian. Subsequently, other thinkers shaped Unitarian beliefs and practices: William Ellery Channing, Theodore Parker, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Then, in the early 1800s, English and Transylvanian Unitarians discovered one another. And in the mid-1800s, American and Transylvania Unitarians did the same. Today, there are approximately 60,000 Unitarians and 60 churches in Transylvania today. King's Chapel shares their heritage and carries in its chromosomes an international radical reformation.