

The History of Baptists in Slovakia

The Reformation and persecution in Slovakia

The first reports of Luther's activities and his writings were brought into Slovakia by merchants just after his public debate with Johann Eck in 1519. His first supporters were among German burghers in the larger towns of central and eastern Slovakia. In 1521, T. Preisner of Lubica read Luther's Ninety-five Theses from his pulpit. The ecclesiastical hierarchy and the lesser Hungarian nobles approved a decree in April 1523 that "all Lutherans and those favoring them...should have their property confiscated and themselves punished with death as heretics and foes of the Holy Saint Virgin Mary." However, the Turkish victory at the battle of Mohács, August, 29, 1526, in which the Hungarians lost their army, their king, two archbishops and five bishops made enforcement of this decree difficult. In the 1530's and 1540's, Lutheranism was adopted by many of the towns of central and eastern Slovakia.

During this same period, Anabaptists began to appear in Slovakia. First in the mining towns of central Slovakia and in the towns of Spiš (Levoca, Spišská Nová Ves, Žilina). One of the best known Anabaptist preachers in Slovakia was Andrej Fischer who was executed for his faith by being thrown from the castle of Kráľová Hôrka in 1539. In 1547, Anabaptists that were expelled from Bohemia began to settle in western Slovakia. Soon their numbers swelled to several thousand. They were given the name "Habsi" taken from the German word "haushaben." They led an autonomous existence led by the "Servant of the Word." They were masters in making pottery, built water systems, mills and excelled in the arts of medicine.

By 1570, the Reformation had the broad support of the entire territory of Slovakia. The Lutheran reformation spread rapidly throughout the Slovakian and German population, while the Hungarians adopted the Calvinist reform movement. At the beginning of the 17th century, three-fourths of the ethnic Slovaks were Protestants. Yet during the dark days that followed, the Hapsburg rulers released a furious persecution designed to force the Slovaks back into the Roman Catholic faith. From 1659 to 1681, Slovak Protestants had 900 of their churches seized by force of arms by the Roman Catholic Hapsburgs. In 1674 alone, 284 Lutheran and 52 Calvinist pastors were brought to Prešpurk (Bratislava) to be condemned for their faith. Two-thirds of those pastors agreed to be exiled. The remaining 93 pastors were tortured and imprisoned. Later, 42 of them were sent to die as slaves on Spanish galleons. These actions led to a revolt in 1680 which forced Emperor Leopold I to call a diet in 1681 granting limited rights to Protestants and to allow them to have not more than two churches in a county. This was revoked within a short time and a new wave of anti-Protestant activity occurred. Even more churches were seized by open military force and Protestants were publicly tortured and/or put to death. In 1691, Leopold imposed new restrictions upon the Protestants in reference to baptism, marriage, burial, and education. This pressed Protestants to revolt again in 1703-1711. When the revolt was crushed by the Hapsburg forces, there remained no more freedoms for Protestants. The remaining Anabaptists fled or were forced to receive Roman Catholic baptism. There would be no more toleration for the Protestant faith until 1781 when Joseph II issued a limited toleration edict.

Nationalism and Baptist pioneers

During the 19th century, ethnic tension intensified as nationalism began to sweep central Europe following the dissolving of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806 and Napoleon's march across Europe to Moscow. The revolt of 1848 led to the compromise of 1867 which created the dual Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Austria and Hungary were separate states, each with its own constitution, government, and language. The two states were united by a common monarch who was emperor in Austria and king in Hungary. This produced a period of growth and an austere building program in Budapest which was newly united into one city in 1872.

Heinrich Meyer, a Baptist colporteur from Germany, came to Budapest in 1873. After 10 years of evangelistic work there, he had baptized 629 German speaking people. One such German speaking person was Johann Tatter, a 30-year old smith from Lubica near Kežmarok, who went to Budapest to find work as an iron-monger. He was led to salvation in Christ Jesus through the ministry of Meyer who baptized Tatter in the Danube River at Budapest in 1875. In 1875-76, several more German workers from Kežmarok area were baptized in Budapest by Pastor Meyer. He later went to the Spišská area of Slovakia at their invitation. There he baptized several new believers. Johann Tatter, the first Baptist from Slovakia, also became the first colporteur in Slovakia.

The first Baptist church in Vavriovo

A Czech-German named Václav Brož (Wenzel Brosch), who was working as a tanner in Kežmarok, heard the preaching of Meyer at the home of a

German Baptist and became a believer as well. He and his wife were baptized April, 26, 1880. Bro? left his job in Ke?marok because he did not believe it was right to work on Sunday. He and his family moved to Liptovsk? Sv. Mikul?where he worked as a master tanner. He invited many acquaintances, neighbors, and fellow workers into his home for Bible study. Bro? invited Michal Bli?tan, a tailor from Vavri?ovo, to attend. Later Bli?tan, a Lutheran, and his wife, who was a Catholic, opened their home in Vavri?ovo for Bible reading with three other couples. On April, 13, 1882, Heinrich Meyer baptized Michal Bli?tan, Bli?tan's wife, and ten other new believers. One of those baptized was J? Medla, a shoemaker who was later to become pastor of the church in Vavri?ovo. The little group of Baptist believers began meeting in the home of the Orech family. V?lav Bro? served as their pastor without pay. On July, 17, 1882, they celebrated their second baptism service where two women publicly declared their faith in Christ. The following year, they baptized two couples from Vavri?ovo. In 1884, fourteen people were led to Christ. In that same year, they sent two brick-layers, J? Tomc? and Matej ?teucek, to Budapest to serve as construction workers and to learn more from Heinrich Meyer. At Meyer's suggestion, ?teucek went on to the Baptist seminary in Hamburg, Germany to further his training. He returned in the summer of 1886 to Vavri?ovo and was ordained by Meyer into the ministry. There he served as pastor of the church that met in his home for the next two years. During that time, he baptized 65 new members. From 1882 to 1888, Vavri?ovo was a mission station of the Baptist church in Budapest.

Beginning of churches at the end of the Empire

In 1886, Heinrich Nittnaus opened his home in Prešurg (Bratislava) for Bible reading. About 20 people of different ethnic backgrounds came to these meetings. Brother Meyer asked Johann Tatter, who was serving as a colporteur in the Tatras, to come to Prešurg and encourage the little group there. One year later they had baptized five new believers. August Meereis, a Baptist pastor from Żyrardów near Warsaw, Poland, moved to Kežmarok in 1888 and established the church there. He also became the pastor of the mission at Vavričovo as well and in that same year established it as a church. Soon, Pastor Meereis found himself as a mission worker for several Baptist missions. There were Lutheran people in Chvojnica who did not want to travel so far to go to a church-house so they began to read the Scriptures in their homes. They sought out the little group Baptists in Prešurg and invited Brother Meereis to come to Chvojnica in 1889. They had their first baptism in that village in July of 1890. By then, the 64 members in Vavričovo had completed the first Baptist church building in Slovakia and it was opened on August 31, 1890.

By the turn of the century, the group of believers in Liptovské Sväté Mikuláš had constituted as a church and missions were begun in Košice, Poprad, Mengusovce, and Klenovec. Several missions were begun in the central part of Slovakia during the first twelve years of the new century. Some of the churches and missions built church buildings as the situation became dark in the political skies over Europe. Slovak Baptists met in Budaörs, Hungary, on February 15-16, 1914, to form an independent Slovak Baptist Union called Bratská Jednota Slovenských Baptistov v Uhorsku. Four churches participated in this historic event and Michal Kováč from the ethnic Slovak Baptist church in Budaörs became its first president. However, in July 1914 what started off as a regional conflict between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Serbia, became a global war involving 32 nations. The political leaders in Budapest supported the Austrian war effort

largely because they feared that a Russian victory would lead to the defection of Hungary's Slavic minorities and the dismemberment of the country. As the conflict continued, however, war losses, food shortages, and other privations incited intense dissatisfaction among the people. The death of Emperor Franz Joseph in 1916, and the succession of Emperor Charles I weakened the ties between Hungary and Austria. Internal unrest increased steadily and Slavic nationalism ignited. The Empire was officially dissolved on November 11, 1918, and Slovakia was now a part of a new republic of Czechoslovakia.

Baptist work in Czechoslovakia

The new republic of Czechoslovakia was a rather prosperous country because of the generous territorial boundaries and inheriting a wealth of industrial resources from the defunct Empire. It had a stable currency and a moderate program of land redistribution. All of this helped the Baptists flourish even during the postwar economic crisis and the worldwide depression that began in 1929. In 1921, the Slovak Baptists began an orphanage in Bernolovo which continued to care for children even through the following World War. The Samaritan Society was formed by a group of Slovak Baptists to help families in financial difficulties. Also in 1921, the Czech and the Slovak Baptists opened a seminary in Prague with some help that was given from abroad. When the seminary opened, it had 11 teachers and 12 students. The Baptists in Bratislava began a mission outreach into the Jewish community in 1924. Through this ministry, they witnessed the love of Jesus Christ among the Jews. This work continued until the fascist government in 1939 prevented the work and the Jews of Bratislava were sent away to the death camps of Nazi occupied Poland. During this peaceful

time of the 1920's, churches were begun in Lucenec, Rožnava-Cucma, Bernolovo, and Miloslavov. Many large estates were partitioned in Czechoslovakia and ethnic Slovaks were brought in from neighboring lands to create new farming communities. In Miloslavov, a Baptist by the name of Juraj Stanko was responsible for such a colonizing venture. He invited many Baptist families from Hungary, Yugoslavia, and Poland to farm this rich land. They met for Bible study and prayer in homes from 1921-26. In 1926, their church-house was completed. The following year their new church-house was the meeting place of the first conference of the Bratská jednota baptistov (United Brethren of Baptists) in the Czechoslovak Republic.

The 1930's brought years of frightful change. Adolf Hitler's Nazi party rose to power in Germany in 1933 and almost immediately began to make insane demands of the Czechoslovakian government. When Germany annexed Austria in 1938, the fate of the republic was sealed. As a result of the terms worked out by Great Britain, France, Germany, and Italy (but not Czechoslovakia) at a conference in Munich, Germany, on September 1938, Czechoslovakia lost its western and northern borders and with them its best fortifications and natural defenses and vast economic resources. Poland and Hungary took advantage of the situation and carved off sections of some long disputed territories. The fascists gained control of government and the Germans invaded. It is not surprising that new church starts and other Baptist work slowed to a stand still during this period as Europe was swallowed in war.

The years immediately following the Second World War and the subsequent ethnic cleansing ironically caused many new church starts. Czechoslovakia exchanged large numbers of people with her neighbors after

the war. Many Hungarians in Czechoslovakia and Slovaks in Hungary changed places. Some of these Slovak refugees were Baptists. Such new churches as Bratislava II in Podunajsk?Biskupice (1945), ?ala (1946), Tekovsk?Lu?any (1947), Nov?Z?ky (1947), Nesvady (1947), Bohat?(1948), Panick?Dravce (1948), and Kom?no (1948) were each made up of immigrants from Hungary and Yugoslavia.

Behind the red star of communism

During this period major industries were nationalized, prewar conservative political parties were banned, and prominent anti-Communists were killed or exiled. The Communists took total control of the government in 1948 and the open persecution of believers began. In 1949, the Baptists built a camp facility on the edge of the Tatra mountains called Rackov?Dolina. The building was just completed when the communist government confiscated the property for a camp for the State. This facility was kept as State property until 1994 when it was returned to the Baptists. The government returned the building in bad need of repair. The communist government confiscated the building of the Baptist orphanage in Bernol?ovo. The building was then used by the government as a medical clinic. Only in 1996 was the building finally returned to the ownership of the Baptists. The communist government also closed the Baptist seminary in Prague during the repressive times surrounding 1952. Baptist seminary students then had to use the Evangelical Seminary (operated by the Lutheran and Reform churches) in Prague or the Lutheran Seminary in Bratislava. The Baptists had begun a small magazine for the Baptist Union called "Rozsievac" (The Sower) back in 1914. The communist government refused permission to publish this magazine in the repressive period of 1952. Later, during the

Prague Spring of 1968, the Baptist youth of Bratislava I church began a youth newsletter called "Sonda" (The Probe) which rekindled the desire in Baptists to have their own publication again. In 1969, "Rozsievac" began to be published again by the Bratsk?jednota baptistov in Czechoslovakia.

From 1949 to 1954, atheistic governmental pressure upon the Church was very powerful and unrelenting. Several Slovak Baptist leaders were arrested and imprisoned for their faith such as Michal Ke?jar, Vladim? Kovac, Juraj Kovac?, and J? Mih?. Being a believer or having active believers for one's parents would keep a person out of college and many positions of management in the job market. Several Baptist churches were closed for varied lengths of time. Sunday schools were illegal. Each church had government paid informers in attendance. The Baptist Union came under the watchful eye of the police and pastors became the employees of the State. Sadly, some of the regulations of that totalitarian government to centralize Baptist polity and control the local churches have been maintained by the Baptists even after the fall of communism. Alexander Dubcek, who was a Slovak and the general secretary of the Communist party in 1968, recognized that radical changes were necessary to prevent major catastrophe in the country. During the following months, called "Prague Spring," his government guaranteed freedom of speech, press, assembly, and religion. They also agreed to the restoration of persons unjustly convicted in the period of 1949 to 1954; and promised federal status for Slovakia. About 600,000 troops from the neighboring Soviet block nations invaded Czechoslovakia and arrested Dubcek. The reforms were scrapped and Soviet troops occupied Czechoslovakia until the fall of communism in 1989.

Baptist work today

After the "Velvet Revolution," Baptists began to stand up and shake off the terror of the past forty years. At the time of the fall of communism, Baptists had nine churches in Slovakia. There are now twenty Baptist churches in the Union. Bratislava III began in 1992 when 23 members left Bratislava I and began a separate work. This church has aimed much of their ministry to liberate those who are enslaved by drugs. Growth in that church has been very rapid. In fall of 1995, the Slovak Baptist Union signed a partnership with Southern Baptists of Virginia and the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention to put together their resources to make the Gospel known throughout Slovakia. During the three year partnership, four-hundred Virginia Baptist volunteers came to Slovakia to provide help in repairing buildings, training in youth ministries, and several evangelistic outreaches. Missions were begun in Levice, Velký Krt'ov and Prešov through a new emphasis in outreach. Since April of 2001, the Baptist churches in Banská Bystrica, Svätý Peter, and Levice were admitted into the Baptist Union. Slovakian Baptists have a separate Baptist Union (Bratská jednota baptistov v Slovenskej republike). The current General Secretary is Dr. Jozef Kuláč. The Baptists have a Bible school in Banská Bystrica. They are also very active in such organizations as Trans World Radio, Pramen N'aje, Every Home for Christ, and the Evangelical Alliance. Two young Slovak Baptist ladies served on ship Logos II. Annually, teenagers are trained by members of the Slovak Baptist Mission Board and sent on mission activities among ethnic Slovaks in Yugoslavia or Slovakia. There are Baptist youth conferences held twice a year. Some Slovakian Baptist churches are reaching out through tent crusades, English as a Second Language summer camps, sports evangelism, and youth conferences.