**Church and Society in the 1960’s and Beyond – A Central-Eastern European Aspect**

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On the wall of our Lutheran conference centre in Gyenesdiás at lake Balaton, there is a painting with three trees. Two of them are rather close to each other, the third one stands a little further. One can clearly notice that these trees have suffered a lot in the storm but in spite of all dangers they are still standing. The artist from the first part of the 20th century wanted to depict the life and fate of the Hungarian, Finnish and Estonian people. All these nations have experienced a lot of difficulties but they are still alive.

These nations are not only connected by a common historical past but also by Finno-Ugric language relatedness. Maybe that is why I always feel a special warmth in my heart when I meet our distant Nordic relatives.

Language is not unimportant but we have another uniting element that is still more central: I came as a brother in faith and through that the distant relations immediately become closer. It is a special joy that we are not only connected by Christian faith but also by the Lutheran heritage that we may underline in this festive year of the Reformation.

It is a privilege to speak at this theological conference on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of women’s ordination in the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church. I greet you as a younger brother because the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hungary only started to ordain women five years later, in 1972. After that, for 12 more years women did not automatically receive all those rights that the male pastors did.

Despite many differences, I also see a lot of common features in the processes our churches have gone through. Therefore it is meaningful to exchange our experiences and the lessons learnt.

As I prepared for this lecture, I had the opportunity to read a book by the first female pastor in Estonia, Laine Villenthal, with the title *Wir wollen keinen anderen Pfarrer! Die Geschichte der ersten ordinierten Pfarrerin in Estland* (Leipzig 2017). I was deeply touched by this book which I could characterise as an autobiography with a background in history and church history. My lecture is actually a kind of reading diary. The participants of the conference from Estonia and elsewhere will probably find my double perspective interesting. It is the perspective of a male pastor from Hungary, a country and church with a lot of historical parallels with Estonia, first of all because of the similarities of our political systems and societies. On the other hand, I read this book from the perspective of the Lutheran World Federation to which both our churches belong. As a minor personal detail, after seven years of Vice-Presidency, I recently handed over this position exactly to the Archbishop of the Estonian church.

THE PERSONAL STORY OF VILLENTHAL

In 1967, the Estonian church took a historical decision. Based on a decision of the synod, the Archbishop ordained a 55-year-old woman to be a pastor. In the autobiography, we get acquainted with this personality in the mirror of the ever-changing fate of Estonian history. At the same time, it is a true ‘her-story’, testifying to the resistance of a young girl, later on a woman.

The picturing of Estonia in the 1920s and 30s is very similar to the situation of my country, Hungary at that time. The circumstances of the mother of the tiny Laine who brings the flock to the pasture with her one-week-old daughter in her hands are just as familiar as the picture of the Nissi pastor arriving on horseback. It is a true diaspora situation: The church is 10 kilometres away and they either walk or drive there on a cart. I can also identify myself with the strong church relations of the parents who buy Luther’s Small Catechism and biblical stories from their moderate income. We also read grievous stories as one of Laine’s small twin brothers dies at night. Early in the morning she sees as her mother irons the festive clothes of the small boy in order to place him in the coffin the father has brought from town. Then the parents mount the seat: the father holds the line, the mother holds the tiny coffin… Laine’s personal faith is awakening in this family surrounding. When the young girl hears from a professor of theology in Tartu that 10 women have already graduated from the faculty, the wish to study theology fills her heart.

We are at the end of the 1930s now. At that time, also in Hungary women could enter the theological faculty operating in Sopron, near the border to the West. In 1924, the first female student, Anna Aczél completed a final study on the topic of teaching religion and raising women. The choice of topic shows that the objective of female students could only be a preparation for catechesis, not at all to serving as a pastor. The details shared by Irén Prőhle who graduated in 1930, are typical of the age. Female students were only allowed to enter the lecture room together with the professor and they had to leave at the same time with him. The breaks had to be spent in a separate room. There was no lavatory for women at the faculty so they had to visit the neighbouring confectionary (Lelkipásztor 2004/5, 162–163). Another female student who started her studies in 1949, relates that the three women students sat always in the first row, then two empty seats, then the male students… (cited by Andorka 2003, 147).

In Villenthal’s autobiography, it is a shocking perspective to read about the German, than the Soviet occupations through a young girl’s eyes. In our country, we also know many descriptions which depict meeting an occupying force from the perspective of a child. Historical changes are often visible through simple things such as is it compulsory to study Russian or not but in some cases, situations are most grave. In Hungary, we know well the feeling Laine describes when religious studies are banned at school and Christmas becomes a working day. But her experiences also go beyond our scope: She has to follow how church literature is selected then destroyed in the library and pastors are being taken away and killed.

Laine’s confirmation takes place in this situation. The pastor first informs the parents that the date has to be advanced because the Communist authorities are going to expropriate the congregation house. What a resolve must have been awakened in this young girl who knelt at the altar knowing that it is the last year confirmation may take place in her church… In this fearful situation, the Bible text for Laine’s confirmation offered consolation: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him” (Romans 8:28). There is a great need for a reassuring voice when in parallel with the service, atheist lectures are being held in the cultural centre.

Here we can also find certain similarities with the fate of Hungarian women who prepared for their calling at the time of the Soviet occupation. In Hungary, after the “year of change” in 1948, the number of students applying for the theological faculty grew strongly and there were also many female students. In 1949, 7 out of the 26 first-year students were women! The reason for the increase was a strong awakening movement in the church. While I was reading the book, I also gained strength in the conviction that there are many common features between the piety of the two nations and churches.

At the point of political developments, where we read about the suffering of Estonians during the war, the German occupation, then freedom, then again Soviet occupation, naturally we cannot draw direct parallels. But let me add two side notes. From the Hungarian side, I can share the feelings of the young teacher now working as a journalist who again sees the national flag of his country and who is able to report about the life of women wearing Estonian national costumes. We have had similar feelings in Hungary and on that background, it is also more understandable why we sang so often the national anthem in the church – the anthem which the Communists preferred to play without the lyrics. Another comment goes to the fact that it is possible for some people to similarly resist National Socialist and Bolshevik dictatorship. Villenthal was such a person. In my church, I may refer to Bishop Ordass who in March 1944, at the time of the German occupation demonstratively changed his family name from Wolf to Hungarian Ordass to show his resistance. At the time of the Soviet occupation, he also acted in a credible way, even if it meant imprisonment for him.

The horrors of the wartime are presented in a moving way. Villenthal reports about finding civilian victims buried in the village, about the miserable march of wounded German soldiers and about the brutality of the Soviet soldiers – also beating one of Laine’s brothers half dead.

After the wartime atrocities, an episode showing the social conventions of the time appears almost cheerful. In order to be able to fulfil her duties, Laine buys a bicycle at the flea market – but as there is no women’s model, she must be content with a men’s construction. This minor detail also shows the situation of women in this region in the 1950s.

The Hungarian reader can very well identify with the stories about the 1949 deportations. Knocking on the door at night sounds the same in each Eastern European country and the rooms of civilians are similarly rummaged by members of the military forces. Unvarying trucks with closed canvas carry equally humiliated civilian people to similarly black railway carriages. The only sin of those men and women, children and elderly people is to be out-of-class or possibly believers. Similarly folded leaflets fly out of the sealed waggons everywhere, on which desperate deportees try to inform their beloved ones. Villenthal also mentions a lady whose hair became grey in one night because of constant terror from the police. I know a similar story from the times of Communist retribution after the revolution in 1956.

The author reports that because of her deported brother, she is not even taken to the kolkhoz to work. Through some miraculous action, she can work as a child-minder at an industrial unit. It is of course forbidden to speak about God but she manages to teach the children biblical stories in the form of tales: She speaks about Josef and the parables of Jesus without mentioning that all this is written in the Bible. We also know examples of such creative teaching in Hungary.

STUDYING THEOLOGY AND BECOMING A PASTOR

The death of Stalin in 1953 did not only bring an enormous change to the Soviet Union but also to Hungary. The grip of the dictatorship somewhat softened and the situation of the church also became better. In this period, Villenthal is invited by the Misso congregation to become a preacher there, with the support of Archbishop Jaan Kiivit.

With this moment, a radically new period started in her life. Almost every element of the story is familiar to us: When her iron bed and writing desk are transported on the top of a car, when the town police keeps controlling her work, when the congregation provides a special reading shelf for her, as it was impossible for her to enter the pulpit. As I heard it from a Hungarian woman having graduated from the theological faculty in the 1970s: “Of course I can go up to the pulpit – to clean it…”. Villenthal also meets opinions like “if a woman will preach, we won’t enter the church ever again”. At home, I heard in the 1980s: “Until we have a living man in our congregation, we will not elect a female pastor”.

At the same time, it is joyful to read how Archbishop Kiivit expressly protects Villenthal from many offenses. First from the nuisances of the authorities, then in connection with a church conference in Prague, supporting her in a way which appears extremely courageous to me. When before the conference, the delegates are brought to Moscow to receive guidelines, the Archbishop instructs her quite openly to speak freely so that no-one can say that her speech was only dictated in advance. Villenthal is grateful for the Archbishop’s encouragement. I know the results of the conference in Prague and other similar events from my own experience and I must speak in a nuanced way about this. On the one hand, it is clear that participants from Eastern Europe could not necessarily talk freely at such an occasion and they may have had the obligation to write a report upon returning home. But the fact in itself that they were able to step out of a closed environment and meet people from other (even Western) countries, had an enormous importance. The Lutheran World Federation or the Conference of European Churches invited people from behind of the iron curtain knowing that not everybody will dare to speak freely and surely there are also agents among the delegates but at the same time for many people they could provide contacts that were indispensable.

For me it seems that also the firmness of Archbishop Kiivit was needed for Laine Villenthal, a woman to be ordained. In the Estonian church, also a synod decision was necessary. As a gesture, the ordination was completed by the new Archbishop, Alfred Tooming but in the presence of his predecessor. Interestingly the process was more subtle in Hungary. There was no synod decision, only a decree of the national church government and when the first female pastor, Etelka Kovács was ordained in 1972, even the Lutheran press did not notice the event. As if they did not want to elevate this decision which was not preceded by long theological disputation but rather motivated by a grave lack of pastors. (As a personal addition: the first female ordination took place in a small village called Csögle where my father served as a pastor for ten years and where I lived myself until the age of six.)

HUNGARIAN STORY LINES

In my lecture, I try to point out similarities between church life in Estonia and Hungary. In the following part, I will present a few archive documents to this end.

Since 2005, our church has taken on the laborious but inevitable work of exploring the contacts and cooperation between the church and the different state authorities of the Socialist regime. Secret documents have been discovered in which church people, also Bishops have informed the secret services. Quite regrettably, also Bishop Zoltán Káldy collaborated for several decades with the Communist state security service. He served as a Bishop from 1958 to his death in 1987 and also as the President of the LWF from 1984 on. For many of us, it was a painful revelation, especially as he was the one who ordained me in 1982. At the same time his deeds have to be seen with all nuances. In contrast to many other church leaders, the majority of Káldy’s reports were practically reports of trips or analyses of international church organisations, sometimes his concepts as a church leader which he shared with the secret police, seeking their permission to realise his plans. Inevitably though, he gave his reports in conspiratory circumstances, under the cover-name ‘Pécsi’.

On 3 July 1962, he wrote a lengthy report about the work of the LWF. In it, there is a part concerning the Estonian (and Latvian) churches:

“For the LWF, it was a constant sorrow that the Latvian (500,000) and the Estonian (350,000) Lutherans had “lost their freedom“. The Lutheran world knows about the Latvians and the Estonians that there is no teaching of religion, no confirmation, no church press and their Theological Academy also only consists of a few courses once a month. The LWF worries for these nearly 1 million Lutherans” (Háló 2, 313).

Cooperation with the Communist security service is naturally condemnable. But it may also happen that through writing these sentences, he draw the attention to the (maybe exaggerated number of) “nearly 1 million” Lutherans in the Baltic states, to the lack of the freedom of religion and to the fact that the LWF follows the processes happening there. I am sure that the Bishop also shared this knowledge in a wider circle.

After the LWF assembly in Helsinki, on 8 October 1963, Bishop Káldy writes (under the cover-name ‘Pécsi’):

“The number of LWF member churches grows steadily. […] There was a special interest towards the wish of the Estonian and Latvian church from the Soviet Union to join. Estonians and Latvians living in ‘emigration’ have done their best to prevent the acceptance of the churches from the Soviet Union to the LWF. They practiced strong Cold War propaganda to this end. They distributed pamphlets against the present leaders of the Estonian and Latvian church and against the churches. They also distributed books which describe ‘in a dramatic voice’ the religious situation in the Soviet Union. They claimed that in the Estonian and Latvian church, there is no freedom of religion, no teaching of religion, confirmation is not allowed, there are obstructions to going to church and religious people are segregated. One of the books describes in almost 150 pages how the Soviet authorities closed the Theological Academies of the Estonian and Latvian churches, how they sent the professors to exile so that there is no possibility now to raise the future generation of pastors. The book also described the personal lives and ‘tragedies’ of each professor. The books are mostly published by Estonian and Latvian emigrants living in Sweden. It is possible that the books have caused a certain amount of disturbance among the delegates.

Despite the many pamphlets, the assembly voted with an overwhelming majority for the acceptance of the Estonian and Latvian churches to the LWF. 270 people had an official right to vote and 13 of those voted against the acceptance of the two churches” (Háló 2, 360–361).

It is a fact that the Estonian church is mentioned in a report to the secret services but at the same time we can conclude that there is nothing in it that could have caused harm to anyone. It is also possible that through that, those living in a somewhat freer country indirectly realised the tragedy of the churches serving in the Baltic states as the report also puts it. I don’t want to relativise an agent’s job but I know that “God is able to write straight even along curved lines”.

In the meantime, the bilateral relations between our churches also developed. On 14–20 September 1970, Archbishop Alfred Tooming visited Hungary (together with the Latvian Archbishop Janus Matulis). They participated at the opening of the Theological Academy and at a pastors’ conference at lake Balaton, visited diaconical institutions and met the leaders of the State Office for Church Affairs. Archbishop Tooming preached in the Kelenföld church (Central Lutheran Archives fond 3).

The visit was returned on 24–30 June 1972 when Bishops Káldy and Ottlyk visited Latvia and Estonia. It is remarkable that they spent much more time in Riga. In his report to the state authorities, Káldy (now under his own name) suggested that the ministerial-level president of the State Office for Church Affairs should be invited to a holiday in Hungary and that the Theological Academy in Budapest should give a honorary doctorate to Archbishop Matulis. This happened in 1973. It is also striking that the title of the report says: “Visit to Latvia, Estonia and the Soviet Union”. The Bishops had to spend two days in Moscow, seemingly because of the delay of a plane and they ended up at a gala reception of the State Office for Church Affairs of the Soviet Union. Káldy mentions that in Tallinn, they did not have any opportunity to serve but they visited two rural congregations. The following comment depicts the ecumenical priorities of the time: “In Tallin, it was taken to be the greatest occasion that Orthodox Metropolite Alexij received the Hungarian delegation” (Central Lutheran Archives fond 3).

Bishop Zoltán Káldy visited Estonia also in 1978 when he participated at the inauguration of Archbishop Hark – together with Finnish Archbishop Mikko Juva, Swedish Bishop Aake Kastlund and LWF General Secretary Carl Mau. He quite pointedly cites some sentences from Archbishop Juva’s sermon on the public service of the church: “Our feast is a testimony to the church appearing in public. […] The Christian church cannot remain in secrecy and is not able to fulfil her duty in privacy”. From his own greeting, he first cites very friendly sentences: “I came to this great feast in order to express our community with the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church and its Archbishop. […] Although Tallin is quite far from Budapest, in Jesus we do not feel this distance, the hundreds of kilometres but only the proximity in Jesus”. After that, Káldy underlined the common roots in Reformation and the linguistic relatedness. At the end, came the obligatory political remark: “At last, we are also linked by the fact that Estonia in the Soviet Union and Hungary build the same order of society, namely the Socialist society. […] We must support the building of friendship between nations and controlling all such forces that initiate hatred between nations and pursue a battle of armament” (Central Lutheran Archives fond 5).

It is also worth mentioning that after many decades, in 1981 the opportunity came again for a few Estonian pastors to participate at the Finno-Ugric pastors’ conference under the leadership of Archbishop Hark. The conference is regularly organised since the 1930s, in 1981 in Iisalmi, Finland.

In her book, Laine Villenthal also mentions Hungary a few times. She is glad to report that in 1982 she participated at a conference for Christian women from the Socialist countries in Berekfürdő, Eastern Hungary. The needlework decorating in Hungarian Reformed churches impressed her so much that she started a handicraft circle in her congregation. In 1983, she mentions having met Hungarian women at a conference in Kiev.

Let me mention also that compared to my own experience, the report of Villenthal about Estonia during the change of the regime sounds very familiar. She felt that one got on “the roundabout of freedom” but was actually not prepared for the new tasks (268–69). Restitution laws made it possible in both countries to gain back certain buildings and cemeteries but at the same time, the money reform made most people poorer than before. Neither of our churches seemed to be up to the many new tasks and we received a lot of support from bilateral partner churches and the Lutheran World Federation. With support of a Finnish congregation, Villenthal received a used Lada in order to be able to serve also in Petseri, on Russian territory. Hungarian Lutherans received Trabants, later on Opels from their Western partners.

It is also a common experience in our churches when Villenthal continues to serve after retirement age because of a lack of a successor. In Hungary, pastor colleagues have also experienced this. On the other hand, most of them were happy to do so when – after decades of repression – they were able to serve freely. A typical episode concerns the announcement of the independent Estonia: Villenthal had a long, tedious day and heard the news about the independence of her home country during a family visit as she did not have a television and listened to the radio only in the evenings.

THE ROLE OF THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

In September 1980, the LWF organised a conference in Tallinn for several hundreds of European participants. The 14 Estonian delegates included Laine Villenthal, now the pastor of Pindi. The opening service in the Dome church and the conference itself, especially meeting international guests made a great impression on her. Many enquired from her, how is youth work in her congregation, is there a possibility for religious education at school and how the congregations manage financially. During a conversation with a Swedish Bishop, she heard that although women had been ordained there since 1958, now there was again a debate on the issue.

At this conference in Tallinn, it became public knowledge that the Latvian pastor Harald Kalnins from Riga had repeatedly visited the so-called Volga German Lutherans relocated by Stalin. From his reports they heard that these people had read their old church books to fragments, that many elderly Christians strive for receiving the communion, that many children are not baptised and they cry out: “Come to us!”. So pastor Kalnins (who had German roots from his mother’s side) went to distant communities which had not seen a pastor for sixty years. At the same time, German delegates reported about Volga Germans who managed to move to Germany but felt rootless there. They had hoped to arrive to a Lutheran country and they were disappointed.

Here I must also mention that at the Budapest assembly in 1984, there were conversations about Lutherans living in far ends of the Soviet Union – if not at the official talks, then in background talks. The secret services were interested in their situation and the plans of the LWF concerning these Lutherans. It was good to read Villenthal’s summary: “Congregations living in the Soviet Union were strengthened by the fact that they are not forgotten behind the iron curtain, that they are also members of the large family of the Lutheran World Federation” (252–53).

SUMMARY

I was very touched by the commitment of the first Estonian female pastor Laine Villenthal. It is exemplary how she summarises her life’s work at a senior age so that it may serve an example for others. At the age of 85, she hears the biblical call: “Put your house in order, because you are going to die” (2 Kings 20:1). She prepares for the departure. She gives thanks for the congregations in Misso, Pindi, Petseri and Võru. She believes that in heaven she will meet all those with whom she spent her worldly life.

On 16 November 1967, Laine Villenthal said in her ordination sermon: “It is only of Christ’s mercy, that I stay here”. Her life and the history of the Estonian Lutherans testifies of the same: We remain only because of Christ’s mercy. As a Hungarian pastor and looking at the whole region Central Eastern Europe, I also underline the importance of Christ’s mercy for us. Our history has had its bright and more shaded periods but we have been able to feel the power of mercy throughout.

In light of the events of the last 50 years, we may identify ourselves with the motto of the 2017 Windhoek assembly: “Liberated by God’s grace”.

English translation: Kinga Marjatta Pap

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