

## Our Partner Church Family Heritage

The family of Rev. Csaba Kecskes has endured challenges that show us what sacrifices have been required to maintain the Unitarian heritage that we treasure. This article focuses on his Grandmother, Berta Deak Nyitrai (1912–1986) and his Grandfather, Mozes Nyitrai (1913–2001).

His grandmother, (along with 2 other women), became the first woman to graduate from Unitarian theological school in Transylvania. Because of conservative attitudes at that time, the women were not ordained. Berta and Mozes met at the theological institute in Kolozsvár and both graduated in 1937. They were married in 1939. Although she was never ordained, Berta served as an assistant minister for two years, and helped her husband, who was ordained, in many capacities throughout their life together.



**Mozes Nyitrai and Berta Deak Nyitrai**

The couple were ministers for a year in Hungary, serving a rural congregation. Currently their eldest son, Levente Nyitrai is the Minister of that congregation. They did not like living in Hungary and in 1940 decided to return to Eastern Transylvania, which was known for

its limestone mines. They were ministers in the cities of Lupeni and Petrosani. At that time the northern part of Transylvania became part of Hungary and the southern part was part of Romania. Mozes served as minister while Berta was the Director of the Unitarian school. Simply because he was a Unitarian minister, Mozes was imprisoned by the soldiers of the Romanian Nationalist Party for nine months. During World War II, while Mozes was in jail, the cities of Lupeni and Petrosani were bombed. Berta and her four children (Csaba's mother was the second child) would take shelter in the bunkers during the bombing.

When Mozes was released from prison, the family decided to move to Szeklerland, to serve the Unitarian Szeklers. This was a particularly needy population following World War II; there was mass starvation in Szeklerland. They settled in Kenos, a small Unitarian village. There they renovated the church and painted traditional Szekler motifs on the furniture inside the church. Mozes worked hard in the fields and Berta not



**Vadad Church (1972)**

only helped the women but also served as a medical assistant in the village. Ten years later they moved again, to a nearby village. This move occurred right before the Hungarian revolution of 1956. The Communists in power in Romania became afraid that the revolutionary movement would spread to Romania and in 1958 they began to imprison intellectuals, in-

cluding Romanians, who were free thinkers. The Communists wanted to organize collectives (colhoses) after the soviet model in every village. The village people did not want to give up their property. So the Communists decided to put the ministers, the leaders of the villages, in prison in order to frighten the villagers into submission. In 1958 both Mozes and his son Levente (who was a theological student) were taken away by the "Securitatea" (Romanian Communist State Security Organization) with their famous, and dreaded, "black car". Very soon they came back for Berta. The three of them were condemned because they allegedly "worked against the state". They were tried, and Berta received one of the longest jail terms among all the ministers – 25 years. Mozes was sentenced to 10 years and Levente to 6. They all actually spent six years in prison until 1964, when an amnesty was declared.

Csaba's mother was 14 years old when her parents and brother were sent to prison. A family in the village offered her shelter (a summer kitchen) near the family home and she lived there alone. She was banished from high school before obtaining her degree. The youngest child of the family, a girl, was adopted by Mozes's sister. The remaining child, a twelve year old boy, went to live with his grandparents. He worked hard in construction. After the amnesty, both of the boys enrolled in theological studies and became Unitarian ministers. When Csaba's mother was 18 (her parents were still in prison) she married Lajos Kecskes, a 31 year old Unitarian minister. Csaba is the youngest of their three sons.

Berta and Mozes, when released from prison, came to live with their daughter and her husband (Csaba's parents) who were serving a congregation in Jobbagyfalva, Transylvania. They hardly recognized each other, having been separated for six years under trying prison conditions. Berta and Mozes were assigned by Unitarian Headquarters to Vadad, a small village not far from Jobbagyfalva. In 1972 they managed to build a church there. The old church had been burned down during the second world war. This was the only Unitarian church built in Romania during the Communist regime. They retired from the ministry in 1980, having done more than their share to help the Unitarian Hungarians to survive and maintain their dignity during difficult times.



**Csaba (baby) with his brothers and parents**