



Transylvanian Winter Excursion

Exploring Farm Fields and Slopes with our Partners

By Monty Low, First Unitarian Church of San Jose



Host family: István Sr., Katinka, Sára, István Jr. and Ella.

In February 2018, my wife Carol and I took a trip to Europe. Included in our itinerary was a 5-day visit to our partner church in the village of Homoródszentmárton, Romania. We were pleased to find the village securely tucked-in for the winter. While snowfall was light during our visit, temperatures in the village were well below freezing. (*Travelers' note: We suggest selecting an all-wheel-drive rental vehicle if you plan to visit in winter to avoid the use of tire chains.*)

Carol and I were hosted by István Sr. and István Jr. of the Bancsi-Rigó family who fed us hearty seasonal food from the farm. We sampled homemade rose hip jam and pine needle sweet syrup, both said to be rich in vitamin C and good for enduring the cold weather.

We first met István Jr. when he was still in college. He was one of the first villagers we hosted in our series of reverse direction pilgrimages. During his stay here in San Jose, István was set up as an intern for 2 weeks at Love Apple Farms (<https://www.growbetterveggies.com/growbetterveggies/>), a local organic farm that, at the time, was the exclusive supplier for a 3-star restaurant. He then had an internship for 2 weeks at a permaculture farm. István is now quite involved with the farm-to-table movement in Romania and perhaps some of his experiences here were beneficial to him.

Together, István Sr. and István Jr. grow vegetables to sell twice a week at a farmer's market in nearby Székelyudvarhely. István Jr. and his wife Katinka are remarkable for their decision to raise their young family to become future farmers after graduating from college. István Jr. gave us a tour of his land and, having no knowledge of farming, we were eager to learn what is involved in running a winter commercial operation. Planning ahead, István plants his spring crop of spinach in the fall. The spinach grows to about 6 inches in height until the first snow cover. These plants go dormant until the snow melts, and then they continue growing for an early spring harvest. In 2017 when there was 3 feet of snow on the ground, István Jr. said he sprinkled fireplace ash over the area of spinach to speed up the snow melt and wake the plants from their dormant state.



In the winter, István Jr.'s main produce for the market are root crops and lettuce. These plants are sprouted from seeds in his "warm" house, which consists of sheet plastic on a wooden frame. In the



Spinach in its dormant stage until the spring melt.

warm house, he has long, thigh-high bins layered with manure and straw. The composting process warms the bins. When the bins are covered with a light cloth, the air under the cloth heats up to 68°F even with freezing temperatures outside. The seedlings are put in starting trays on top of the compost bins under the covers. Typically, there will be 2,000 seedlings in the warm house timed to harvest throughout the season.

There is a small wood stove for heat on the coldest days. When the seedlings are about ½ inch across, they can continue to grow at lower temperatures and are transplanted to beds in an unheated greenhouse. Under a light cloth cover in the greenhouse, the plants grow until they are

ready for harvest. While crops are grown in the winter, the bulk of the income is made in the spring, summer and fall. I wondered if these cold weather techniques were his invention, and István Jr. told me



István Jr.'s warm house: Composting bins and covered seedlings (left), seedlings emerging in starting trays (center) and sprouting winter crops (right).

that this is considered common knowledge in the village. István Jr. has gained some notoriety for his farming methods, which are 98% bio (organic, pronounced *beeohh*). Find out more about István Jr. at <http://mihir.ro/tavasz-a-foliahazakban>. If using Chrome browser, sign in and right click to bring up the Translate option. A video (in Hungarian) is also available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIhtT3DA7PY> Homoródszentmárton is located inside the crook of the Carpathian Mountains, a range running north to south then west to form the Carpathian basin. Because we were in the mountains, I could not resist going snowboarding at the local ski hill. (*Travelers note: Currently, United Airlines allows a ski/snowboard bag and a boot/helmet bag for free.*) Getting to the resort requires chains or all-wheel-drive because of several steep switchbacks. Due to being unfamiliar with the road and the lack of guard rails, it was wise to ride with a local. Levente Zsombori was kind enough to organize a fun expedition of 10 fellow villagers to the Madarasi Harghita ski resort (<http://madarasiharghita.hu/mh/foldrajz/>), which was about 17 miles away. Snowboarders beware; this little 4-run resort only has 2 “T”-bars for lifts. The resort has several places with overnight accommodations and is very family friendly.



István Sr.'s solar fruit and vegetable dryer.



As a California snowboarder, it was hard to resist going off-trail into the knee-deep, untracked powder. I elected to stay on-piste (*piste is French for ski run or path*) and ride my snowboard with my hosts while they skied. For those not on the slopes, there were winter hiking trails to explore and a wonderful deck with an outdoor café. At the café, they were cooking vegetables, breads, various sizzling meats and sausages on a couple of 3-foot diameter iron skillets. The aroma was incredible. Hot wine was the drink of choice. While there are several winter recreation choices, including large-scale

resorts in Romania, other resorts dotted along the Carpathian range and even ski hills near Kolozsvár, we were very happy at this small, uncrowded hill.

Rev. János Pál presided over Sunday church services. Everyone from across the village walked on treacherous dirt roads of frozen mud, ice and snow to get there. The well attended service was held at the church conference center, a separate building, because the church has no heat. While the conference center room has a wood-burning stove in the back, it was still cold; everyone kept on their jackets and knit hats. After the service, congregants turned their chairs around to face the warm stove and mingle. Coffee, tea and various delicious baked treats were served.



It was wonderful to visit with these dear friends and to catch up on news. We visited many families in the village, and they are all eager to host our First Unitarian Church of San Jose pilgrimage when we come back in the summer of 2019.



Homoródszentmárton posse: Carol (third from left) and Monty (fourth from left in white) at Madarasi Harghita ski resort.