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# Catarama's Romanian Ordeal— Where Was the Church?

by Sidney Reiners

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On April 30, 1987, the very day that the U.S. House of Representatives debated the suspension of the “most favored nation” economic concession to Romania, Dumitru Popa, president of the Romanian Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, joined eight other religious leaders in an unprecedented press conference held at the Romanian Embassy in Washington, D.C. Popa and the other heads of denominations had been flown from Bucharest by the Romanian government to assure members of Congress and the American press that, as the archbishop of the Orthodox Romanian Church put it, there is “not one person in prison” in Romania because of his or her faith.

Other points made at the press conference of Popa and the other leaders included the claim that religious freedom in Romania is better than elsewhere in the eastern bloc—except for “administrative interferences” and the absence of church schools and seminaries. The U.S. Congress, it was said, was overly impressed by outdated case histories about imprisoned church members. As for demolition of churches, well, that was a blessing because new church buildings would be able to be built.

Popa never referred to the struggle of his own Adventist members to save the “grand church” where the largest Adventist congregation in Romania met until the building was torn down by the government (see box). He also never mentioned

that one of the most celebrated cases of a Christian imprisoned by the Romanian government involved a Seventh-day Adventist. How Dorel Catarama was imprisoned, held by Romanian authorities, and then finally released provides a case study of what the official Adventist church is not doing and what others are able to accomplish in protecting religious and human rights in eastern Europe.

The Catarama family lived in the Oituz region of Romania, an area known for its resistance to collectivization, and were active members of the small Adventist church there. Ignoring the demands of school officials and the advice of denominational leaders, the Catarama children refused to attend school on Sabbath. They were regularly reprimanded and publicly humiliated at school assemblies for this and for refusing to join the Communist youth organization. Their church suffered from an acute shortage of Bibles, hymnals, and Sabbath school materials, a situation that has not changed, since all these are still contraband under the Ceausescu regime. Even typewriters must be registered with the government.

When Dorel was drafted into the military, he explained that he would not participate in military training on Sabbath. His commanding officer thought he was a Jehovah's Witness and a conscientious objector. One day he ordered Dorel to fire a machine gun for long periods of time and to carry it with him all day. By the end of the day Dorel was very ill. Providentially, he was sent to a military physician who at first was very hostile but later confessed that he himself was an Ad-

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ventist who had abandoned his faith under pressure in the army. After spending several nights talking with Dorel he allowed him to go home.

In February of 1982, after many attempts, Dorel's father Valeriu and brother Viorel succeeded in obtaining passports to the United States. Once here they immediately applied for and received asylum. They notified their family in Romania of their decision. The authorities then called in the family and told them that if Valeriu and Viorel did not return they would retaliate by putting Dorel in prison for 15 years.

On April 9, 1982, more than 50 militiamen and securitate (secret police) came to the parental Catarama home and the home of Dorel, a couple of houses away, at 9:00 in the morning. Until about 9:00 p.m. that evening they ransacked the houses, knocked holes in the walls, interrogated family members, dug in the ground around the houses, and even looked in the tomato juice. They never said what they were looking for, but apparently were hoping to find something to use to trump up a charge against Dorel.

That same day Dorel was arrested and charged with the only crime the police could think of, "food overstocking." This is a serious offense in the poorest nation in Europe, whose government is so determined to pay off its foreign debt that it even exports essential food supplies. Dorel's anxious mother Ileana paced back and forth on the street by the prison, hoping to catch a glimpse of her son. The police told her she must leave or be arrested for prostitution.

The overstocking charge was later dropped and replaced by the claim that Dorel had illegally worked simultaneously in two tailors' shops, and embezzled thousands of dollars from them. Then the Cataramas in America were told that if they would forward \$3,000 Dorel could go free. They say they thought this was bail money. They raised the amount and wired it to the Romanian Foreign Trade Bank, April 27, via the Continental Bank of Chicago; it was returned June 22. Shortly thereafter, the authorities charged Dorel with illegally possessing foreign currency in 1978-1980.

During the first four months of his incarceration Dorel was beaten, drugged, and subjected to marathon interrogations. He was denied a de-

fense attorney. Under this pressure he signed a confession, which he later repudiated.

At a trial in August of 1982 both companies from which Dorel had supposedly embezzled submitted sworn statements that Dorel owed them nothing, and audits showed that no money was missing. His attorney was also able to prove that Dorel could not have illegally possessed the \$3,000 because it did not arrive until he was already in prison in 1982, and it had only passed from bank to bank.

The lack of incriminating evidence proved to be no obstacle, however, to Romanian "justice." On August 12, 1982, the court committee, consisting of Court President Constantin Ivancea, Judge Mioara Ochiroș, and Procurator Nicolae Marcuț, found Catarama guilty and sentenced him to 10 years' imprisonment. (Viorel was also convicted in absentia of embezzlement charges and sentenced to eight years.)

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### **Dorel's insistence on keeping the Sabbath and his refusal to eat pork resulted in frequent beatings and a bread-and-water diet.**

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Dorel Catarama's house, car, furniture, and money were all confiscated in payment of fines, thus leaving his wife Veronica and seven-year-old son Dragos in dire straits. He appealed his sentence. The result was that on October 5, 1983, it was increased to 14 years.

**A**lthough Dorel was already tried, convicted, and sentenced, in October, 1984 another trial was begun, as a result of which the fines were levied again (but unpaid because there were no more resources to confiscate). Dorel's sentence was again lengthened, this time by one and a half years, but this extension was soon canceled in an amnesty for short sentences. Representatives of the American embassy attended some of the proceedings. Dorel's insistence on keeping the Sabbath and his refusal to eat pork resulted in frequent beatings and a bread-and-water diet. His wife's packages of

soap, washcloths, and food were not passed on; later some food was allowed in. When he was caught with a Bible he was transferred to another prison; for a while even his wife did not know his whereabouts. He spent a considerable amount of time being shipped around in a freight car.

In May of 1982, Viorel and his father Valeriu set out for Washington, D.C. Unable yet to frame even one English sentence, they traveled in a \$375 station wagon—without a driver's license. In Washington Viorel carried a sign stating his case in the Capitol Hill area and around the Romanian embassy. The Cataramas slept in their car.

This effort did not achieve much, so they returned in July. This time, after sleeping in the station wagon for two weeks, their situation came to the attention of the Capitol Memorial Seventh-

day Adventist Church. Herman Rivera arranged a place for them to stay, church members wrote letters to their congressmen, and the pastor included Dorel in prayer each week.

Viorel began a hunger strike before the Cannon House of Representative Office Building by day and the Romanian embassy by night. At the same time, his mother and sister notified the Romanian government that they were also going on a hunger strike. After seven days Viorel began a *greva setei* (total abstinence, not even taking water).

During this time Viorel's plight also came to the attention of Jeff Collins, who was later to become executive director of Christian Response, the American branch of Christian Solidarity International.

Keston College in Britain and Amnesty Inter-

## Government Razes Romania's Largest Adventist Church

From *Keston News Service*

In August of 1986 government demolition crews moved in and destroyed the largest Adventist church in Romania, located in Bucharest—but not without opposition. In an unprecedented show of resistance, 200 members of the church took up occupation of their threatened building as a demolition team arrived July 29. The staunch members, including women and children, continued to occupy the building while church leaders negotiated with officials over an extension of the “absolutely final” August 3 deadline. The building, which lay in an area of the city being redeveloped, also housed the offices of the Bucharest administrative district covering more than 200 churches in the southeast part of the country, a residential portion, and an archive of important church and family records.

Church leaders, who had been notified of the intended demolition, were holding out for an adequate replacement for these facilities, but none were secured.

Confrontation between the 100-member congregation and Romanian authorities began on July 18 when officials

posted a notice at the premises, announcing that demolition would commence the following day, a Sabbath. Demolition did not actually begin then, but water and electricity were disconnected several times in the following days, only to be reconnected by church members.

The crisis came to a head when a demolition team came to remove the roof. Up to 100 members had already been maintaining a round-the-clock vigil and this number quickly increased to 200, some of whom positioned themselves on the roof. Within an hour the building was ringed by uniformed militia who prevented more Adventists from joining the occupation. Both the militia and the demolition workers withdrew the same day.

Occupation continued until August 6. In spite of appeals from the American Department of State, early that morning a crew entered the building, forcing their way past 50 or so Adventists still maintaining the occupation. Several members suffered minor injuries, but there was no serious violence and no large-scale involvement of police or other security forces.

Members resigned themselves to the loss of their building and busied themselves with salvaging as much as possible of the contents.

An application to rebuild, submitted by leaders of the large Seventh-day Adventist Church in Bucharest, has been

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*Keston News Service* is one of the publications of an ecumenical research institute outside London, devoted to gathering and disseminating information about religion in communist countries.

national also began broadcasting the facts of this case. Amnesty chapters in America and Europe wrote thousands of letters on Dorel's behalf.

On the twelfth day of this hunger strike, Viorel collapsed in front of the Cannon Building and was hospitalized in George Washington University Hospital. Embarrassed, the Romanian government granted exit visas to his mother, his sister Miorara, and his nephew Razvan, who arrived in America in December, 1982.

Following this victory, Viorel began to master the diplomatic and political avenues available to him. In 1983 someone testified on his behalf before Senate hearings on most-favored-nation status for Romania. In 1984 and 1985 he testified before the Senate finance committee on the subject. (Nations

granted most-favored-nation status pay lower tariffs on goods imported to the U.S. Romania's desperate economic situation makes this an essential advantage for them.) Communist nations that restrict emigration must receive an annual waiver from the President on the premise that emigration curbs have been eased. This gives the U.S. economic leverage to press for greater freedom in these nations.

On June 15, 1985, Viorel appeared at a press conference in the Rayburn House of Representatives Office Building—a press conference that displayed the kind of high-level support Viorel and other Romanians had enlisted with the help of Christian Response. Senator Paul Simon of Illinois, in particular, took up the Catarama case as a personal cause. David Funderburk, who had re-

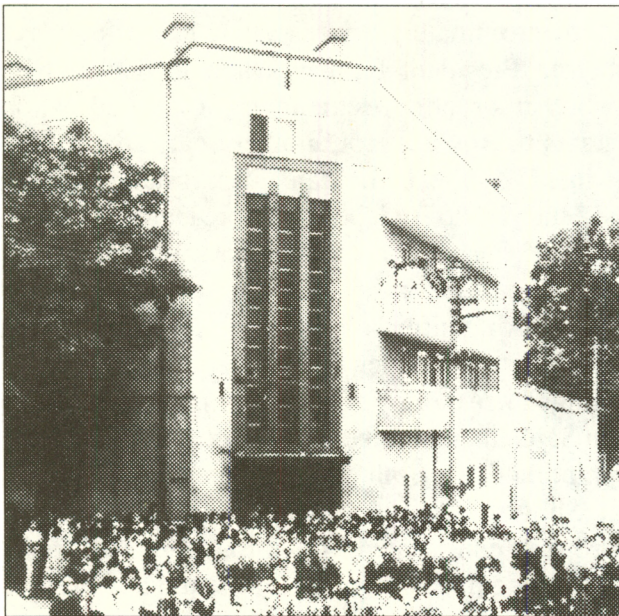
met with the response that “no site is available,” according to reports reaching Keston College.

The church, the largest Adventist congregation in Romania's capital, has divided into at least two smaller assemblies, which meet in different parts of the city in premises which have not received official approval for the purpose. The largest group, about 400 strong, is meeting in a tent which has been erected in the grounds of a member's house. The tent is packed out, with standing-room only, for

the main meetings every Saturday. Smaller midweek Bible-study meetings are being held in other members' homes. So far as is known, temporary arrangements have not been hindered in any way by the Romanian authorities.

Leaders of the group now meeting in the tent, who, within days of the demolition submitted the rejected application to rebuild, have appealed for Christians—and Adventists in particular—in the West to support them in their demand for adequate permanent premises.

**Before**



*The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Bucharest before it was demolished by government authorities.*

**After**



*The former site of the Adventist church, razed by the government to make way for an urban renewal project.*

cently resigned as ambassador to Romania because of his frustration over the reluctance of the American government to try to do something for persecuted Romanians, specifically named Dorel Catarama as an example of victims of the Ceausescu regime. Over the four years of Viorel's campaign, a considerable number of members of Congress have added their influence by lobbying the Romanian ambassador and the U.S. Department of State.

At this time Sidney Reiners and Steve Reiners contacted Dr. Ernest Gordon of Christian Relief Effort for the Emancipation of Dissidents (CREED) and introduced the Catarama case to him. Gordon, whose expertise and diplomatic manner make him a highly respected witness on Capitol Hill, is

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known for his skill in persuading the Romanian government to release prisoners of conscience. His role in "quiet diplomacy" proved invaluable in securing Dorel's release.

Christians in Crisis later recruited Viorel and other Romanians for a panel discussion on religious freedom in Romania to be held in New Orleans concurrent with the General Conference session of the Adventist church. In spite of a telephone call that warned Viorel's parents that they would never see him again, the panel presented its firsthand knowledge of the situation in Romania at the Hilton Hotel without any problems.

Listeners to the panel were shocked to learn of the subservience of all denominations in Romania to the government and connivance with the secret police at all levels. When Viorel later attempted

to discuss his brother's situation with Romanian Union President Dumitru Popa and the Romanian delegation in the presence of Bert Beach, Popa vociferously repeated the government accusations against Dorel, and throughout the session staunchly denied any religious persecution at all in his nation.

When Secretary of State Shultz visited Romania in 1986 he brought up Dorel's case with President Ceausescu, who promised only to have his minister of justice investigate. Later, a prominent New York businessperson with strong business ties to Romania appealed to Ceausescu to release Dorel. Ceausescu promised he would, but set no date.

In the summer of 1986 a bill was pending before Congress to suspend most-favored-nation status for Romania for six months, to be renewed on condition that Romania demonstrate a liberalized human rights policy. To gather support for the bill, Christian Response arranged a demonstration in Washington May 19 in which a considerable number of Adventists participated. The demonstrators marched from the Washington Monument, past the White House to Captive Nations Park, where a press conference was held, then on to the Romanian embassy. The name of Dorel Catarama figured prominently in the placards and banners.

Approximately a week later, just a few days before President Reagan's annual decision on whether or not to extend most-favored-nation status to Romania for another year, Edwin Derwinski, of the U.S. State Department, made a special visit to Budapest. Before Derwinski even arrived Ceausescu released Catarama on condition that he leave the country.

Speaking after his release, the 35-year-old Adventist lay leader said he had prayed for two things since the day of his arrest: not to be released on Sabbath, and to be able to see his 86-year-old grandmother. Both prayers were answered.

Shortly after his release, he was advised that property confiscated from him, which included a house and most of its contents, could be returned. Four days later he was told that nothing would be returned and that he still had to pay "compensation" of 465,000 Lei and that he could not leave

the country until he had done so. (The average Romanian salary is about 30,000 Lei per year).

A large sum of money was raised by fellow Adventists in various parts of Romania and was offered to the authorities about July 30. It was then that he was told this would be unacceptable unless accompanied by a signed confession, which he steadfastly refused to give.

The Romanian government finally dropped its demand that Dorel Catarama sign a confession, stating that he was guilty of the charges against him and granted him and his family a passport.

On September 14 Dorel Catarama finally arrived to a dramatic welcome in Chicago's O'Hare Airport. Representatives of human-rights organizations, Chicago television stations and newspapers, and Illinois politicians gathered to savor the victory of freeing another prisoner of conscience.

Obviously, the silence of Adventist leaders in Romania on human-rights cases involving their own members did not prevent the Seventh-day Adventists' flagship

church in their nations' capital from being razed to the ground. Popa's attendance at the press conference in Washington, D.C., may have had some connection with the church apparently receiving oral assurances that the Seventh-day Adventists will sometime be able to renovate two buildings to house a church and conference headquarters. (Given the record of the Romanian government, one can only wonder whether, even if the promises are fulfilled, the new facilities will escape further urban renewal.) What will never be forgotten by the Cataramas, many human-rights organizations, scores of high U.S. government officials, and dozens of U.S. Congressmen is that the leadership of the Seventh-day Adventist church did not once speak out in defense of one of its members.

It may be the ultimate commentary on conditions in Romania that instead, the leader of Romanian Adventism felt compelled to fly all the way to this country to testify to the fine human-rights record of the Romanian government.