

History of the Reformed Church of Sárospatak

The year 1538 is considered to mark the beginning of the Reformation as it took root in Sárospatak, it being initially propagated by the elder and local priest István (thought to be István Gálszécsi) who fully ascribed to the reforms already enacted in Wittenberg. The fortified church built during the reign of the kings of the House of Árpád and presently used by the Roman Catholic community was where the Reformed-faith community of Sárospatak held their worship services for one hundred fifty years. This all changed on the 5th of August 1671 when Zsófia Báthori, widow of György Rákóczi II, Prince of Transylvania, evicted the Reformed-faith community from the church and gave it to the Roman Catholic community. This she did in total disregard of her recently deceased husband's professed denomination and also of the will of Zsuzsanna Lorántffy, her mother-in-law.

For a brief period following this the church once again passed into the possession of the Reformed-faith community but soon, due to Jesuit pressure, the Reformed community was again dispossessed and found itself without a church. During this difficult period, Pál Ember Debreczeni was the pastor who loyally shepherded the flock until it was possible to do so. The Jesuits soon banned the free practice of the Reformed faith and imprisoned the Reformed-faith pastor. Once the tide changed and the town no longer under Catholic domination, worship services were held at the Reformed Church College between 1703 and 1705. In 1705, the Reformed-faith congregation had a wooden church built on the present lot and, in 1726, a larger church was built which could also accommodate the students of the College. The pastor's pew-seat from the wooden church is behind the pulpit of the present church. The inscription upon it refers to the prophet Elijah's life: "*Non Verbo pIetas, at re, MonstretVur oportet, Igne CaLens Isthoc speret aD astra rapI,*" that is: "It is not in words but in acts that your devotion is to be recognizable. It is fuelled by this that he awaits his arrival in heaven." The bold letters represent the number: 1764. Ferenc Rákóczi II promised the Reformed congregation that he would have a church built next to the College but the defeat of the war of independence waged against the Habsburgs pre-empted this.

The wooden church began to deteriorate rapidly and the need of having a church built of stone was given voice. For Protestants, however, the acquisition of the necessary permits in the existing unfavourable political climate was practically impossible. The king's personal authorization was needed. A providential God, however, is able to turn unfavourable conditions to the advantage of His own. When Joseph II, the sovereign who advocated tolerance towards Protestants, visited Sárospatak, the leaders of the Reformed congregation submitted a petition to him in which they pointed out that their existing sanctuary was in a deteriorated condition and was too small in respect to the increased number of worshippers. The county authorities and officials participating in the decision-making process supported submitting the petition to the sovereign but Pál Jabróczky, the local Jesuit priest, objected to the decision, claiming that the youth had no need of a church because worship services could be held in the College for them and the wooden church was more than sufficient for the other members of the congregation. Neither was there need for a steeple, a small bell-tower would suffice, he insisted. After all this, the response issued by the sovereign arrived on 2 November 1773, it consisting of authorization being granted for enlarging the church but it made no mention of which materials could be used. It made mention of a small tower and a bell (no mention of *bells!*). Thus the leaders of the Sárospatak congregation turned once again to the sovereign requesting that he grant authorization for the construction of a stone church because wood was expensive and not of enduring quality. Lengthy and labyrinthine negotiations ensued. Authorities unsympathetic to the Protestant cause were the ones who fixed the maximum dimensions the church could have. It was in 1827 that it attained the height it presently has. Before actual construction could begin, the congregation's leaders had

to issue a statement indicating from which sources they would ensure the costs of construction. Their document thus stated that the miners would donate the needed stones free of charge, an individual had offered to donate the carved stone needed for the door and window frames and, likewise, the timber and beams needed for the roof as well as the wooden shingles and lime would all be acquired from Ladmóc. In addition to this, the number of supporters willing to provide funds had nicely increased in the meantime. The cornerstone was laid in March 1776, construction continued for five years and the church was consecrated in 1781. An earthquake in 1834 damaged the church, causing a partial collapse of the ceiling arches. In 1895, the church's ceiling and main entrance were renovated, the interior acquiring its late Baroque style interior decorations at this time.

The clock in the tower has been there from the beginning, the original mechanism having been replaced by a new one in 1881. The large bell poured in the Sárospatak canon foundry from captured enemy canons was donated by György Rákóczi I in 1642. It was re-poured twice and presently weighs one ton. The second bell bears the name of Comenius while the third bell has the name of Zsuzsanna Lorántffy and was poured in 2007.

The organ of 24 registers was built in 1871 by Ludwig Mooser and is the country's only organ built by the one-time renown master from Salzburg which retains its original form. Its renovation was completed in 2009.

There is seating for 1,500 in the church and its accoustics render it suitable as a concert site. Throughout the school year, the church serves as a place of worship for the students of the Reformed Church College, also.

Jesus says: *"Come to me, all of you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I shall give you rest."* (Matthew 11:28)

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