

Chronology of Events

Confiscation Case of the Sports-Ground of the Lorántffy Zsuzsanna Reformed High School

1995: The City Council of Nagyvárad/Oradea in its Resolution Nr. 118/1995 granted the usage of the sports-ground, free of charge, to the former Andrei Saguna High School for 25 years. This resolution is still in force and remains valid through 2020.

2002: On 23 July 2002, the Local Government of Oradea and the Királyhágómellék Reformed Church District concluded an agreement to ensure free usage of the sports-ground for the students of the Lorántffy Zsuzsanna Reformed High School, too. This local agreement and addendum No 20593/2002 became valid after the removal of the entire Saguna High School from the church facility.

2003: The Királyhágómellék Reformed Church District received legitimate possession of the Lorántffy Zsuzsanna High School (which had been illegally confiscated by the communist dictatorship years ago). The former tenant, Andrei Saguna High School (a Romanian public institution), left the building in ruins for its new tenant (a Hungarian minority Church). The destruction was tantamount to near demolition.

2004: The local Romanian elections are held this year. To gain extra votes, Oradea Mayor, Petru Filip, makes a campaign promise to give possession of the sports-ground to the Sfânta Treime Romanian Orthodox Parish in Oradea, which is adjacent to the sports-ground property. The local Romanian government never notified the Királyhágómellék Reformed Church District of their unilateral decision.

2005

January: The Királyhágómellék Reformed Church District is no longer permitted to use the sports-ground for the students of the Lorántffy Zsuzsanna High School. The sports-ground property is transferred to the Orthodox Parish (Romanian majority Church), which is adjacent. Local government officials never notify the Királyhágómellék Reformed Church District of their action, which violates their earlier agreement. According to official reports, the Orthodox Church intended to convert the sports-ground property into a memorial park for "martyr Orthodox bishops." This remembrance would deprive 416 children of their physical education.

February 3: The Reformed Church District turned to Ilie Bolojan, Prefect of Bihor County, for legal remedy, however, no answer was provided.



May 12: Clifton Kirkpatrick, President of the World Alliance of the Reformed Churches and General Secretary Setri Nyomi, along with Duncan Hanson, Europe Secretary of the American Reformed Church visit Oradea. They initiated a meeting with Mayor Petru Filip to address the sports-ground case. But Mayor Petru Filip refuses to meet with them upon their arrival. Having waited in vain for a response to their official letter, which was sent in January, Setri Nyomi expresses his disapproval of the Mayor's inaction and disregard for protocol. Nonetheless, the church delegates visited the sports-ground.



June 16: Immediately after the Lorántffy Zsuzsanna High School students left for their summer holiday, the "Sfânta Treime" Orthodox Parish smashed the locks of the sports-ground. This damaged the fence and ruined portions of it. The Orthodox Parish took possession of the site. The entrance was entirely blocked off to the Reformed Church with a new lock. Further, a video camera was installed on the balcony of the neighbouring Orthodox Parish, to observe all activity at the site 24/7. During the night, a huge graven cross and seven smaller crosses were brought to the sports-ground.



June 20: The Reformed Church held a press conference at the locked sports-ground of the Lorántffy Zsuzsanna Reformed High School. A large number of interested people attended to learn about this specific issue. Without showing any identification, the police interrupted the press conference. Bishop László Tőkés was escorted from the site. The Bishop was subjected to interrogation and charged with trespassing and violation of private property.



June 21: János Antal, Ecumenical Officer of the Reformed Church District, informed the national and international media about the confiscated sports-ground case, through a multilingual publication.

June 22: The Reformed Church contacted competent local and central government authorities for their support in seeking a peaceful and swift settlement of their case. Ecclesiastical organizations and foreign sister churches were also contacted for their support. Simultaneously, the highest decision making bodies of the Romanian Orthodox Church were contacted to initiate an open dialogue on the case.

June 28: In an act of retribution, the police interrogated Bishop László Tőkés again. Further, additional persons were also interrogated; innocent persons were targeted for harassment.



July 2: Deputy Prime Minister Béla Markó, President of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (DAHR), on the occasion of his visit to Oradea promised the swift settlement of the conflict for the benefit of the children.

September: Due to continuous protests and extensive media coverage, the graven crosses were removed from the sports-ground. International public opinion prevailed.

2006

January 13: The Reformed Church protested the legal action brought against five of its employees, including Bishop László Tőkés. This legal harassment continued on the heels of the original June 2005 “trespassing” complaint made by the Sfânta Treime Orthodox Parish. Since then, the Bishop and his colleagues were summoned to the police headquarters as “suspects” – another instance of blatant harassment.

February 14: The Reformed Church held a community conference in the festive hall at of the District Headquarters which generated a great interest among the local residents. The conference objective was to reach a final settlement in the illegally confiscated sports-ground case. The Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania officers, including Vice Mayor Rozália Biró, a special guest at the conference, promised a peaceful and fair treatment of the case.

June 16: The Bihor County court of law rendered a decision on the illegally confiscated sports-ground case, adjacent to Lorántffy Zsuzsanna Reformed High School. The case was submitted by the Directory Council of the Királyhágómellék Reformed Church District, in the summer of 2005. The Bihor County court ruled against the Sfânta Treime Orthodox Parish, recognizing that the sports-ground property had been illegally seized by the Local Government of Oradea from the Királyhágómellék Reformed Church District. Thus, the sports-ground property needed to be returned to the Reformed Church District.

July 14: The Directory Council of the Királyhágómellék Reformed Church District, regularly maintained communication with sister churches, ecumenical organizations, and the international public about the sports-ground case, its current situation and legal status.

October 27: George Pataki, Governor of New York State, met with Bishop László Tőkés and visited the locked sports-ground. Speaking to the media, Governor Pataki declared that he would attempt to enlighten the international political opinion, regarding the sports-ground case. Governor Pataki stated: “I consider this appeal important not merely for political reasons, but I am aware that one should not deprive the youth and, more precisely, the students of a school of physical education.”

November 28: A letter was forwarded to Mr. Vasile Blaga, Minister of the Interior, which explained the illegally confiscated sports-ground case, by the Reformed Church District. In the letter, the Reformed Church asked Mr. Blaga to intervene and find a reasonable resolution to the case.



2007

January 7: Every Sunday morning, a prayer demonstration was held in front of the Lorántffy Zsuzsanna Reformed High School. The prayer demonstrations began 7 January and continued until the beginning of March.

January 17: János Antal, Ecumenical Officer compiled an English language case study on the sports-ground case. This informative document was posted on the internet, for public viewing, and also forwarded to ecumenical organizations.

January 31: The Lorántffy Zsuzsanna High School held a morning religious service, where Vice Bishop István Csűry announced the start of a nonviolent civil and church disobedience campaign. The campaign would continue for an indefinite time period. The campaign objective would be to regain possession of the illegally confiscated sports-ground. To attract international attention, Reverend Lajos Sándor began a hunger-strike, in order to gain public sympathy for the children and build public opinion for the case. The church was open all day for those who sympathized with the protest. The church bells tolled every hour, from noon until evening. In the afternoon, Reformed Church District football teams, representatives, and students from local high schools “broke into” the sports-ground, where they competed in a football championship. In secret, the “trespassers” were filmed from the balcony of the neighbouring Orthodox Parish. The police arrived; however, they did not interfere, at that time. The following week, vigils were held every afternoon in the Olaszi Church, near the High School.

February 1: In the morning, representatives of the Orthodox Parish welded steel fencing around the sports-ground; in order to eliminate the possibility of another “break-in” by the children. Bishop László Tőkés, István Tolnay, Councilor on Education, and János Antal, Ecumenical Officer, met with Virgil Bercea, Greek Catholic Bishop, who assured them of his official support for the Reformed Church, regarding the sports-ground case. In a published open letter, József Tempfli, Roman Catholic Bishop, reminded the general public that the Sfânta Treime Orthodox Church needs to return its place of worship to the Catholic Church – for it was confiscated by communist authorities from the Catholic Church and given to the Orthodox Church. Bishop László Tőkés reminded Béla Markó, Deputy Prime Minister, of his 2 July 2005 visit, where he promised the swift settlement of the conflict for the benefit of the Reformed Church children.

February 2: In the Lorántffy Zsuzsanna Reformed Church Centre, near the High School, the Directory Council of the Királyhágómellék Reformed Church District, held a session and resolutely expressed their protest against the injustice that the church and the school had to endure. They made their complaint public in a press conference.



February 4: After the Sunday morning service, the students, parents, teachers and other members of the congregation marched to the sports-ground. Each student threw a ball over the steel-welded fence, which had their own name written on it. The ground was covered with 416 colored balls.

February 5: In a communiqué, the Church District informed the media that their members would continue praying for the sports-ground case. During the following week, the leadership and clergy of different denominations were invited to the evening services. Thus, the representatives of the Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Lutheran, Unitarian, and Baptist churches could also participate protesting the sports-ground case.

February 7: Bishop László Tőkés held a press conference, regarding the sports-ground case. Another football match was announced for that afternoon. However, the teenagers could not enter the sports-ground because masked anti-terrorist commandos appeared on the spot, with automatic weapons. These shocking events were captured by the cameras of local and national TV reporters. The images were forwarded around the world, drawing attention to the “raw” power aimed at “abusing” and “intimidating” the innocent children of the minority Hungarian Reformed Church, by their own Romanian government. Following the masked anti-terrorist commando action, the Sfânta Treime Orthodox Parish, once again, denounced Bishop László Tőkés, who continued to stand up for the rights of the 416 students of the Lorántffy Zsuzsanna High School. The favoritism and military harassment displayed on behalf of the Orthodox Church, is clear evidence that the Sfânta Treime Orthodox Parish had no intention of reaching a “peaceful” resolution to the sports-ground case.

February 14: The Reformed Church announced an open forum for local residents to be held in the festive hall of the Church District. Prominent individuals were invited to attend, including city politicians, clergy, media, and representatives of Institutes of Education. A large number of people gathered for the forum. However, there was absolutely no one present at the forum representing the Oradea City Council or the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania.

February 26: The Church District invited its church members, local citizens, students, and teachers of the Lorántffy Zsuzsanna High School to participate in a large-scale protest. Following the announcement of a peaceful disobedience demonstration, the Olaszi Church was filled with people. At the last minute, the demonstration was called off. The reason for canceling was two-fold. First, the City Council promised to rehear the sports-ground case at their next meeting. Second, the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania indicated that the sports-ground would be lost for good, if a demonstration was held.



February 28: The City Council appeared to pass a favorable decree, which was based on a compromise of splitting the sports-ground into two separate parcels. The first parcel would be allocated to the Orthodox Parish. The second parcel and a neighbouring public domain parcel would be combined to create a “new” sports-ground. In accordance with this decree, the Lorántffy Zsuzsanna High School students would be provided the opportunity for physical education at other schools. The enforcement deadline was set for 28 March 2007. When this decree was announced, it was concealed that the draft agreement contained a clause, whereby the decree was an exclusive stipulation.

March 27: In a letter addressed to Sofronie Drincec, Orthodox Bishop, Bishop László Tőkés informed the Romanian church leader about the sports-ground case and asked for his support to reach a diplomatic solution.

March 28: The City Council did not take any tangible action to enforce its own decree leading up to today's enforcement deadline, 28 March 2007.

March 30: In a brief letter, Orthodox Bishop Sofronie Drincec informed Bishop László Tokés that he was aware of the sports-ground case. However, he could not intercede to resolve the conflict, because its jurisdiction resided with the Sfânta Treime Orthodox Parish.

April 24: The Church District sent a letter of complaint to the City Council and the Prefect, in which the Reformed Church demanded the enforcement of the 28 February 2007 decree.

May 15: The City Council rejected the 24 April letter of complaint.

May 20: The Church District filed court papers to begin legal proceedings to enforce the 28 February decree brokered by the Oradea City Council.

May 24: In a letter addressed to Traian Băsescu, State President, Bishop László Tőkés thoroughly informed him about the sports-ground case and the discrimination against the Lorántffy Zsuzsanna High School students. Further, Bishop Tőkés proposed that justice must be enforced and the sports-ground must be returned to Lorántffy Zsuzsanna High School. In another letter addressed to Tempfli József, Catholic Bishop in Oradea, Bishop Tőkés suggested that the Roman Catholic Bishopric should emphatically demand the restoration of the Szent Brigitta Church, which was illegally confiscated several decades ago by the Sfânta Treime Orthodox Church.



May 31: In observance of International Children's Day, the Church District organized an international prayer demonstration which was held at the Olaszi Church. A large number of local and foreign people prayed for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. One day before the Local Government of Oradea was to meet; the sports-ground case was listed on the meeting agenda. However, on the meeting day, the aldermen postponed the case. This prompted a new demonstration. Approximately 600 demonstrators waved Romanian, Hungarian, and European flags and carried colored balloons, while 30 police men surrounded them. As they marched to the Bihor County Prefecture, they sang psalms. From the Prefecture, they marched to the City Hall, where the balloons were released, sending a signal to the Local Government of Oradea that they were fed up with their unfulfilled promises.

July 20: Given the extremely tense relationship between denominations in Romania, and the likely prospect that the sports-ground case would not be resolved by the start of the European Ecumenical Assembly in September, a dual action plan was formulated. The Church District expressed its intention to boycott the main event to be held in Sibiu/Hermannstadt/Nagyszeben or stage a demonstration in Sibiu against the discrimination of all the minority churches in Romania.

August 14: Bishop László Tőkés requested Orthodox Bishop Sofronie Drincec forward a letter resolving the conflict and respecting the terms of peace, accord, and fairness. In addition, he emphasized, that in the spirit of the Sibiu communion, a final solution would end the noxious conflict and would be advantageous to all parties and viewpoints. Recently inaugurated, Orthodox Bishop Sofronie Drincec declared that his church canons precluded any interference by himself into the jurisdictional affairs of the Sfânta Treime Orthodox Church.

August 16: The Királyhágómellék Reformed Church District requested that three organizations intervene by contacting Orthodox Bishop Sofronie Drincec in order to immediately resolve this unblest conflict, since all their previous efforts had failed. The three organizations included the Conference of European Churches organizing the third European Ecumenical Assembly, the European Area Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and the Fellowship of European Protestant Churches

August 30: The Directory Council and the Board of Deans of the Királyhágómellék Reformed Church District informed the media about the planned nonviolent protests that would be staged in Oradea and Sibiu. The objective would be to raise the attention of European sister churches and sympathy for the ethnic and denominational discrimination of minority churches in Romania, including the sports ground conflict.



September 4: The Church District renounced its protest during the Sibiu meeting, after Christian deliberation, since its original objective was to peacefully reach an agreement through establishing a dialogue. The Church District did not want to attempt to overshadow this wonderful ecumenical opportunity with such grave issues and problems. Nonetheless, it wished to distribute informative handouts to the participants of the Assembly about the hindrances, which impeded the realization of an authentic ecumenism in Romania (including the sports-ground conflict). In Sibiu, five Reformed Church young persons were arrested, who intended to distribute the flyers. This police action generated indignation by the 2,500 church representatives and participants, represented at the Assembly.



November 25: Bishop László Tőkés and Mayor Petru Filip were elected as Romanian representatives into the European Parliament, respectively, as an independent candidate and as a candidate of the Democratic Party. In a letter addressed to Petru Filip, Bishop Tőkés requested the settlement of the sports-ground conflict by him in order not to “export this delicate issue into Brussels”



2008

January 31: The City Council reconsidered the right of usage of the illegally confiscated sports-ground adjacent to the Lorántffy Zsuzsanna Reformed High School. A contract established beneficial terms for the educational institution.

April 10: The City Council signed the contract for the usage of the sports-ground.

April 17: Finally, after a long struggle, the Reformed children set foot back on the sports-ground!



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