

CONFERENCE – ALCOHOLISM: HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES

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On 28 and 29 August, I attended the above conference in the historic town of Alba Iulia (Roman Apulum) in Transylvania, Romania.

Follow the link to see the program. The first day covered broadly historical issues, while the second day had more of a focus on medical and treatment.

I spoke about the early Quaker missionaries in Australia, who founded the temperance movement, but were not advocates of abstinence. My thesis is that their commitment to true moderation rather than abstinence was largely a function of Quaker pragmatism, but was also grounded in principles which rejected the prohibition of a practice just because it could be abused.

In my capacity as a visitor from distant Australia, I was also briefly interviewed by Romanian TV about the Restraint Project and what we were trying to achieve. (I tried not to commit us to anything impracticable like real outcomes.)

The keynote speaker was Dr Hasso Spode, a German historian of alcohol. His view is that, in terms of alcohol policy by governments, we are entering a new period of quasi-prohibitionism. He notes that in 1992, countries of the EU adopted a policy of reducing per-capita alcohol consumption by 25% - whatever the country's starting level might be, effectively discouraging any level of consumption.

Several speakers from Romania described aspects of the country's relationship with alcohol. John O'Brien from Ireland revealed that the common view of the Irish as heavy drinkers is actually not borne out by the evidence. The nineteenth-century Irish, in fact, adopted abstinence on a wide scale, with a view to proving themselves more virtuous than their colonial masters.

Nationalism, either as a reason for abstinence or a reason for drinking, was shown by several speakers to have been a factor in consumption levels in Serbia (Peter Atanaskovic). Punitive taxation of alcohol in the inter-war period in Poland (Adrian Zandberg) diverted consumers towards smuggled liquor and ether consumption.

After several talks on the first day, Dr Spode concluded that our traditional view of abstinence as a Protestant thing had been challenged by my view of the Quakers as promoting moderation rather than abstinence, and by John O'Brien as revealing Catholic Ireland as a stronghold of abstinence. He noted, however, that historians have to make broad generalizations.

Day Two

The focus was on treatment, with Dr Wilfried Koehler, director of the addiction centre at the Bürgerhospital in Frankfurt, describing the multi-disciplinary programme he runs. This is based upon the model of addiction as a chronic disease, with recovery involving maintenance and the continual likelihood of relapse.

Dr Floyd Frantz, originally from Kansas, runs a treatment centre in the Romanian city of Cluj-Napoca. He gave an account of the Minnesota Model principles, similar to the Alcoholics Anonymous 12-step programme. The model represents a clinical adaptation of the first five steps of the AA system. There is the same essentially religious element as found in AA (which basically says that the continuing help of God is required for the drinker to give up). He is unsure what the clinic's success rate might be over all, but suggested it might be in the range of 25%.

A Romanian psychologist, Ioana Todor, outlined several psychological models of alcohol addiction, including behaviourist models (claiming that the drinker drinks in response to external and internal stimuli), and cognitive models, which have dominated since the 1990s. In Dr Todor's view, each only gives a partial account of the phenomena.

From a non-government treatment service based in Athens, Dr Patrick Akrivas emphasized the importance of prevention in alcohol services. He specializes in family counseling, believing that family experiences can have the same impact on children's brains as trauma. He referred to research indicating that the neural damage sustained by post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) sufferers is similar to that sustained by those addicted to alcohol, suggesting that similar areas of the brain are affected. Not surprisingly, Dr Akrivas is a strong supporter of the disease model of alcoholism.

In response, Dr Spode reminded us that researchers should not offer simple answers to complex problems, but should ask questions!

Later speakers outlined some of the issues with alcohol in Romania, and the final speaker was Father Iulian Negru, a Romanian Orthodox priest who runs an addiction program associated with a church. He cited the importance of the spiritual aspects of addiction, whereby addiction is only a symptom of a person's real problems with identity. I had asked Father Iulian earlier if, in the Eastern tradition, the assistance of divine grace was considered as vital as it was in the post-Augustinian West. He said that they didn't call it grace, but they did call upon divine help in the same manner.

Alba Iulia

In between sessions, our hosts (Dr Marius Rotar and his colleagues at the Alba Iulia Museum of Unification) showed us around the fascinating old parts of the town. Alba Iulia was the Roman Apulum, centre of the Roman province of Dacia. The Roman 13th Legion (Legio XIII Gemina) was based here, and there are many interesting finds in the museum.

Later an important outpost of the Austro-Hungarian empire, Alba Iulia has a magnificent baroque gate (built 1714-1728) topped with a statue of the Emperor Karl VI on horseback, crushing the bodies of defeated Turks, who (our Museum guide assured us) were holding in their hands their severed testicles – the ultimate disgrace. This monument to imperial savagery was adorned, among other things, with statues of the four cardinal virtues.

The Transylvanian countryside struck me as rather like Australia's – a bit dry and bare most of the time, but rich in grains and fruits and vines. It was 40 degrees on the day I arrived, and my phone didn't work (that was a bit of a low point). But our hosts' hospitality soon made up for any shortcomings, and all in all it was fascinating to get perspectives not only from Romania, but from other Eastern European nations – Serbia, Poland, Moldova – who are all coming to grips with the social impact of the devastating events of the twentieth century.