

A SHABBAT IN BUDAPEST

INTRODUCTION

This is a report on the five days (26-31 May 1988) when my wife and I spent a Shabbat in Budapest teaching, visiting, and learning about Jewish life there. The trip was organised under the auspices of the Budapest Project Committee - a sub-committee of WUPJYS - and partially sponsored by the West London Community.

In recent years, the Budapest Project Committee has made contact with a group of young Budapest Jews (This group has no formal affiliation with any Jewish organisation either inside or outside Budapest or Hungary; however, for convenience sake, in drawing up this report I shall refer to those who make it up as 'friends of WUPJYS.'). During this period exchanges have taken place between WUPJYS and its 'friends'. A few of the friends of WUPJYS have visited GB for conferences and the Leo Baeck College study week; similarly, some members of WUPJYS have visited Budapest, particularly over the festivals of Pessach and Rosh Hashannah in order to teach and celebrate together. As for this trip, it was the first time a rabbi had been sent and my brief was to lead the friends of WUPJYS in prayer and study for a Shabbat. This I did with my wife's support and I shall return to the teaching side of the trip and the reactions I was able to glean in a little while.

In addition to the friends of WUPJYS, who are very much on the fringe of the Budapest Jewish community, I made contact with more established members of the community - rabbis, teachers, and the editor of 'New Life' the local Jewish newspaper. By meeting them and hearing what they had to say about the community, its relationship to Hungarian society and the political order, I was able to piece together a broad picture of Jewish life there. I hope that in the course of this report, by developing a broad picture of the Budapest community the reader will be able to place the aspirations of the friends of WUPJYS into some kind of historical, communal, and religious perspective.

ON THE FRINGE OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY: DISCUSSION AT THE BETHLEN SYNAGOGUE

Let me begin by describing a meeting which took place at 6.00 pm on Monday the 30 May at the Bethlen Synagogue in Pest. The meeting was organised by a psychologist aware of the large number of disaffected Jewish young people in Budapest, those searching outside of the established communal structure for their Jewishness - their 'roots', 'identity', some sense of belonging, a set of values. Only two members of the friends of WUPJYS attended this meeting; for the rest there were about sixty to seventy people. The organiser had not only invited young people, but also a number of rabbis and in particular, the principal of the Rabbinical Seminary in Budapest, Rabbi Schweitzer.

The meeting began with three young Jews commenting on why the synagogue did not respond to their needs and what should be done about it. For example, one of them spoke about the problem of people going into the synagogue and not understanding. Let me add, at this point, that most of these people although they may have been born Jewish and come from Jewish families, their parents not only did not practise Judaism but had abandoned it in favour of communism; these people, therefore, had little

