

Sim Shalom Annual Report - 2007

The congregation thrives with many well attended programs, but lack of good premises continued to be one of our biggest problems for the past year. We hold most of our programs in Balint Haz, the Budapest Jewish Community Center, where we pay no rent. The seating space is adequate, but is not very esthetically pleasing. There is no place to store our Torah and very little storage for things which we use for services and study programs, no office space, and no space for our library. So life there is rather inconvenient, and bare bones. There is no possibility to start any educational program for children, such as we would do if we had our own premises. The main advantages are the central location and that it is free. Also, there is a growing tendency to hold joint holiday programs with Balint Haz, which has an active and lively membership.

Having signed a contract late in 2006 with the Hungarian government for the use of a government-owned building, we were hoping to convert it into satisfactory premises if we could raise the necessary funds to renovate it. A fund raising campaign was initiated early last year. A new website, www.sim-shalom.org was built, featuring material about the projected premises. Fund-raising brochures were prepared in English and Hungarian, and sent to friends and supporters both here and abroad. So far, only about 15% of the needed money has been collected. Three fund-raising events have been held by the congregation, the latest being the sale of hand-painted silk objects, much of it with a Jewish theme, and made by congregation members. We are now learning that the contract is such that we may wish to cancel it.

A bright spot in our congregations life is the growing ability to fund our day-to-day operating expenses. Both Jewish and secular grant-awarding entities have been found in Hungary which are funding a significant part, perhaps 35%, of our annual expenses on a continuing basis. Now that Sim Shalom is a legally recognized religious institution, it can benefit from the Hungarian institution of the 1% campaign. This allows any payer of Hungarian income tax to designate 1% of his tax to be given to the congregation of his choice. Last year we received \$20,000 from this source, about 25% of our annual expenses. There was an increase of a factor of 2.5 in the number of donors, compared to the previous year. A vigorous advertising campaign during the last tax return season resulted in another significant increase this year.

The first Reform Jewish Kabbalat Siddur in Hungarian was finalized by Rabbi Kelemen and published with a beautiful cover designed by one of our artist members. It greatly enhances the Friday night services. In addition to the usual well-attended Holiday celebrations, weekly services, and many educational programs, there were several important activities of a more unique nature during the year. In May, our Family Camp was held at Szarvas Youth camp, owned by the Joint (JDC). Young people were very involved in the services, and many of the programs. In September, we made a major contribution to the Keshet Conference, where all facets of Jewish secular and religious life in Hungary were present. Sim Shalom ran two worship services and a workshop on personalizing Torah text through the tools of art, called Handmade Midrash. Rabbi Kelemen was one of three Rabbis discussing the week's parasha from the viewpoints of the different religious streams. Also, in the summer, Rabbi Kelemen participated in an ecumenical religious service for the attendees of a Rotary International Conference held in Budapest.

Last year was a very active one for receiving and exchanging visitors. A special highlight of the year was a WUPJ sponsored mission of 23 American rabbis, led by Rabbi Uri Regev, President of WUPJ, and Rabbi David Gelfand. The purpose was to familiarize the rabbis with the birth and resurgence of Reform Judaism in Central Europe. Almost as exciting was when two of our teenagers spent the summer in Seattle as Counselors in Training at a Jewish day camp. This was all arranged and partially funded by our Seattle friend and supporter, Lenny Kashner, who had spent several months in Budapest the previous year. Rabbi Joel Abraham made his annual appearance with his Confirmation Class in the spring. There were also large visiting groups from the Federation of NYC/LI, and from Beth Emet congregation of Evanston, IL.

Other events of note include the attendance of Rabbi Kelemen and her husband at the WUPJ Biennial Conference in Jerusalem in March, the attendance of two of our young leaders, Miklos Budai and Nick Young, at the Beutel Leadership Seminar in Israel, also in March, and the studies of Peter Radvanski at Pardes in Jerusalem.

Jesse Weil, Treasurer
April 1, 2008

2008 Update

Early in the year, the Sim Shalom Board made several decisions.

1. It was found that the contract with the Hungarian government for the use of their building did not provide long term security for the use of the building even after we had renovated it, nor for the refund of the renovation funds expended. Hence, it was decided to cancel the contract.
2. It was decided to search for a suitable, probably smaller, building to buy and renovate into usable premises for use for the next few years. The preferred areas are the Old Jewish Quarter, where there are several other synagogues, or in the more modern area of Pest known as New Lipotvaros, where many Jews live.
3. A new teenager youth group has been started with a dozen teenagers who are the children of Sim Shalom members and their friends. Two adult leaders are running the group, one a teacher in a Jewish high school and the other her protegee.
4. Since 6-10 children of age 6-7 are now available in the congregation, a Talmud Torah class will be started in the fall, to be taught by the Rabbi and one assistant who is currently helping with the programs for small children. It is expected that this new educational program will bring new families into Sim Shalom.