

Sim Shalom Annual Report 2008

Budapest, Hungary

Overview

Sim Shalom Congregation made very good progress on many fronts in the year 2008. New efforts to serve the youngest members of the congregation were among the most important advances. A Cheder/Talmud Torah, taught by the Rabbi, was started in the fall, and has already increased in class size by 50%. A Youth Group for teenagers, with professional leadership, has attracted a dozen youngsters into a program which includes making a photographic record of our old Jewish Quarter, holding a service in a restored provincial synagogue where the population has mostly vanished, and forming their own small band.

Our financial situation continues to improve, with a 10% increase in donor support through an income tax checkoff scheme. This is now providing about 35% of our annual budget. We have gained strong Jewish community recognition in the form of a position on the Board of MAZSOK, the principal organization handing out financial support from restituted Jewish property. Our most recent Past President is on the Board, and also on the Grants Committee.

The congregation's religious and adult educational programs continue with stable attendance, perhaps somewhat limited in growth by our continued housing in the Jewish Community Center, Balint Haz. Fund-raising for the purchase of our own synagogue premises has stalled due to the world financial crisis, so we have decided instead to look for something which can be rented for the next few years.

Our governance structure continues to improve as we gain more experience and get good young people on the Board, including a dynamic new President, Gabor Radvanski. Not only is he giving good leadership to the congregation, but he is reaching out strongly to the greater Budapest Jewish community. He and the Rabbi are building connections to many other Jewish organizations here, with the long term goal of not only having Sim Shalom completely accepted here, but of reorganizing the structure of the governance of the whole Jewish community here. At present this is largely in the hands of the Neolog movement, which does not recognize Reform as being legitimately Jewish, nor that a woman can be a „real“ Rabbi.

Numerical facts

membership: 50, with 20 families (total ~80 people)

supporters (based on tax rebate donations): 250, plus additional 50-100 who don't pay taxes

attendance:

- regular programs: 8-30

- lesser holidays: 30-50

- High Holidays and Seder: 60-120

life cycle events: 5 (including bnei mitzvah, brit bat, marriage, funerals/shiva prayers)

annual budget: total 53 000 EUR

• major income sources:

◦ "1% tax rebate" designated by our supporters: 39%

◦ MAZSOK (state Jewish compensation fund) grants: 25%

◦ foreign grants: 10%

◦ foreign and Hungarian donations (incl. members): 12%

◦ membership dues: 5%

◦ ER support: 1.3%

◦ other: 8%

- major expenses:
 - professional staff wages and taxes
 - administration (bookkeeping, lawyer, office rental)
 - teenager and educational programs
 - regular programs
 - holiday events
 - family retreat camp

Continuity

- Membership

Since the breakup with people who later started Bet Orim, the membership and active participants in Sim Shalom has stabilized in the past years. Members are paying their dues, and donations are coming in regularly.

- Leadership

Rabbi Katalin Kelemen was busy leading our regular liturgical and educational programs, teaching converts, preparing bnei mitzvah students, and working on multiple projects (teenage group, siddur, Cheder-Talmud Torah). Board member terms were extended at the 2008 AGM, and a new president, Gabor Radvanszki (member of the board in the year before, and 10 years ago) was elected. He is a founding member of Sim Shalom.

Our former president, Bernadett Gardos, kept her Board membership, but she had to step down as president due to conflict of interest with her government job. She continues to support the community both as an active member and leader.

- Tax rebate (1%) donations from supporters

The total sum we received in 2008 based on the personal income tax rebate scheme was 22,000 EUR by approximately 250 people (donated in tax year 2007). In 2008, 276 people donated, and we expect to receive this coming January (donated in 2008) about 25 000 EUR. These results show the continuity of care for Sim Shalom by an extended group of supporters.

- Regular programs

Friday evening Kabbalat Shabbat service: is held bi-weekly, alternating every other week with more culturally oriented Oneg Shabbats.

Saturday Shacharit service: is held bi-weekly; on the alternate week is the adult Torah circle shiur.

Liturgy and Hebrew class are also held on every Shabbat.

Identity group: Meeting bi-weekly, they share personal counseling with professional moderators, all related to their Jewish experience and evolving identity. All participants are registered members of the congregation now, which is a result of year 2008.

- Rabbinical student

Peter Radvanszki, student at LBC London, is visiting Budapest regularly, and is taking part in many Sim Shalom activities. He is publishing articles in online Jewish publications, and also presented at the annual Limmud/Keset Hungary, leading chevruta learning groups of Talmud.

Successes

- Talmud-Torah (cheder - Sunday school)

Our rabbi and her support team have successfully started a first-year Sunday school for children of the community. With an initial enrollment of 8 students aged 6-8, there are now 13 students enrolled. It was advertised also outside the community, and some of the students are from non-member families, showing that our visibility in the education field is good.

- Teenager group

Our teenage youth group, meeting regularly, and led by two professional educators, was active in a photo documentation project of the historic Jewish district of Budapest, and also doing multi-media presentations with their own music. Their pictures were exhibited also at the concert of Alei Gefen choir from Tel-Aviv. We had a large group visiting from Netzer UK in the summer hosted by our teenagers also. There is an ongoing cooperation with a Seattle (USA) Reform congregation to exchange summer camp madrichs with our teenagers. Three of our member children participated already.

- Spring-summer camp

The community had about 50 people for a long weekend Shabbaton in Szarvas JDC camp, where we could pray in a "normal" synagogue building, and share many spiritual and creative programs with each other.

- Breaking out of isolation in Jewish Hungary

The 3-day Limmud/Keset Hungary conference (total participants ~250) in November was a great opportunity to get more integrated with other Jewish organizations and people. Sim Shalom's rabbi and members took a leading role in organizing and participating in the conference! Our progressive voice is being asked for and heard now in these pluralistic environments!

MAZSIHISZ (Jewish Federation which excludes the progressive Jewish organizations) tried to negotiate us into their sphere of influence - but with unacceptable terms. They initiated the contact! Sim Shalom is now listed on the Mazsihisz website, with Rabbi Kelemen actually called a rabbi!

We had the Consul General of the Israeli Embassy as our guest when a Tel-Aviv choir (Alei Gefen) concert was held for our benefit. We have active communication with the Zionist organization Szochnut (JAFI) on multiple levels. We are engaged with the local JDC management, even with a changing leadership on their side.

Szim Salom has been invited and has participated in many JDC and Szochnut and other organized events: Judafeszt, Hanukka.

Rabbi Kelemen participated in a week-long seminar in Israel that brought together people from different segments of Hungarian Jewish community life (under the Buncher leadership programme, organized by JDC). This is a basis for a prolonged active discussion about the future of Hungarian Jewry.

Our rabbi and president were invited to the receptions at the Israeli Embassy, and the Hindu Krishna Outreach VIP dinner, meeting other religious leaders and dignitaries.

- Taking a leading role against a MAZSIHSZ self-legitimization attempt (Jewish Congress)

Our name has been heard within and outside the Jewish community, when we publicly declared 6 months before anyone else: „This effort is a subversion attempt to regain legitimization for this fundamentally non-democratic and flawed organization, which is suffocating for the Hungarian Jewry.“ Other organizations (like Chabad and other progressive communities) later followed with similar statements.

- Public relations: Jewish and non-Jewish media appearances

A lot more concentrated efforts were made to make our voice heard, with success, including Szombat Jewish magazine interviews (offline, online), MR1 Kossuth Radio program suggestions, ER newsletter, Sofar.hu (a Jewish portal including video) interviews with our rabbi), judapest.org (independent Jewish blog)

- Direct talks with government (Ministry of Culture, responsible for religious matters)

The planning for long-term funding of religious organizations in Hungary is being discussed now at the Ministry of Culture. We achieved that this is done not only by an exclusive elite, but a broader group, where Sim Shalom is fully participating.

- Dialogue with Bet Orim and other non-orthodox groups

Our common approach to the "Jewish representation" question lead to a historic signing of a common statement declaring the Mazsihisz Jewish Congress approach to be fake pluralism and suggesting a real pluralistic initiative. We invited Bet Orim to join us in

the "World-religions Cooperation Forum", but they did not accept. We have also cooperated with younger people active in the Masorti/Conservative movement.

- MAZSÖK breakthrough - Jewish compensation funds distribution

Our former president (Bernadett Gardos) was recently appointed as member of the Board of MAZSOK, the most important state-Jewish compensatory money distribution foundation. This is a result of intensive lobbying activities. She was appointed to the Grants Committee also.

- ARZENU - reform Zionism

Our member, Gabor Karmo, participated in the December ARZENU seminar in Jerusalem, with the support and some funding from the leadership of Sim Shalom. Based on the seminar, Gabor is in the process of setting up the Hungarian chapter of ARZENU - which could fill the vacuum created by the quite passive Hungarian Zionist organizations - especially (not) visible during the Gaza crisis.

- Collection of clothing for charity purposes

Based on a quick campaign around the High Holidays, we were able to collect ~50 large bags (~750kg) of used clothing that we handed over to the Jewish Welfare Foundation (MAZS - ran by Joint). Some help came with grass-roots level cooperation from a Neolog synagogue.

This can be a basis for 2009 larger campaign of charity - outreach to the wider Jewish community and possible interfaith cooperation.

- Collaboration with 6 other religious (non-Jewish) organizations

The "World-religions Cooperation Forum" is meant to reinforce efforts of representing the interests of small registered religious groups versus the four large "historic" denominations dominating government lobby (one of the four is the Jewish federation MAZSIHISZ, which excludes the progressive Jewish congregations). We are working together with Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus and Hungarian Unitarian Christians on a consensual basis. Our cooperation resulted in talks with the Ministry of Culture (see other point: talks with government), and public relations initiative that reached a number of people through the media.

We are also communicating with the Office of the President of Hungary, complaining about discrimination against religious organizations in state protocols. Public inter-faith discussions will be organized including the religious and lay leaders of these groups.

- Establishing Sim Shalom committees outside the Board of Sim Shalom

A Synagogue Committee and a Finance Committee were established to extend the efforts and bring more focus to strategic decisions of the Board. Our decisions and preparation process became more transparent.

- Welcoming US groups (including URJ/ARZA, WUPJ and other synagogues)

With brief presentations we tried to explain the peculiar position of Jews in Hungary, and progressive efforts and initiatives at the same time. (about 5-10 groups visited in 2008)

- Hand painted silk judaica

Our Creative Group has created beautiful hand painted silk Judaica that we offer for sale on many occasions (Jewish community events, foreign visitors, etc). It is a unique initiative in the otherwise industrial and non-artistic scene of Hungarian Judaica.

- Cooperation with Rotary Club International

Rabbi Kelemen took a leading role in presenting Jewish inspiration on various occasions, including a Rotary International meeting in Vienna, where interfaith initiative was a centerpiece

Challenges

- Permanent premises

Cancelling the contract for the "Amerikai ut" government owned building has been initiated: we are still awaiting a final answer from the property manager telling under

what conditions we can return this building. The decision to act was based on the facts that the renovation costs were 2-3 times higher than expected previously, and the location turned out to be very inconvenient especially for our senior members.

We have recently decided that our follow-up plan to try to raise money to buy our own premises is unrealistic in the current financial crisis. Our income has increased enough that we can look for some satisfactory rental premises. This would be for a few years, with the intent that eventually we would again seek to buy a property to use as a synagogue. Our presence in Balint House (supported by JDC) is becoming more problematic, as they are losing their capability to provide suitable facilities for our Friday night programs, as well as our expanding child and youth educational programs.

Any decisions related to our premises will involve our new Synagogue Committee, and the membership of Sim Shalom.

- Cash-flow

Due to MAZSÖK not functioning for 6+ months, payments of vital grants have been withheld. Government payouts of donations through personal income tax designated to us are slower than usual (bureaucratic issues).

These two factors gave us cash-flow problems at the end of the year. We are past that, but we are extremely vulnerable to these 3rd parties. The grants to be received from the Dutch Jewish Humanitarian Fund to support our teenage youth group and new Shacharit Siddur will help reduce our exposure.

- Resource allocation (human resources)

We are facing situations where certain people take on impossibly great (and long) efforts to support the community with their work. We shall share the burden better, activating more members and supporters to do volunteer work for the community (event management, welcoming and supporting visiting groups, etc.).

- New website (with dynamic, often updated content)

We have a project for setting up a new, dynamic website where content can be uploaded easily by editors and contributors, and which also allows moderated forums, blogs and more pictures and regularly updated news from the progressive and generic Jewish world. Our resources for this (especially human resources for project management and ownership) were scarce.

- 1% tax rebate donation campaign

We expect to increase both the amount and the number of people donating, based on a sophisticated advertising campaign we are currently planning.

- No united front in reforming Jewish representation and funds distributions

Despite our great efforts (and starting cooperation with other organizations), there is no short or even mid-term hope for a democratic, pluralistic Jewish representation system, and state compensation fund distribution scheme.

- Young adults

Our former young adult group dispersed: some people left Hungary to study/live abroad, and some aged out of this category. We need to find new ways of gathering this age group 18-35 better into our community.

- Liturgical changes based on participant feedback

We are in the process of re-thinking certain aspects of our prayer practice, with our rabbi and director of music taking the lead in discussions with members. There is strong member interest in this discussion.

- Potential program structure changes based on evaluation

The Board is looking at attendance numbers and feedback for regular programs, and we are planning to make certain changes to support our growth and satisfaction of our members.

Conclusion

Last year Sim Shalom made significant progress of becoming a better functioning progressive Jewish congregation. The organizational and other changes started last year

should become visible as attendance and membership grows, and as our position in the Hungarian Jewish community is becoming more accepted and recognized. Our strategic decision to be made and our capability to execute it regarding our permanent premises will have a long lasting affect on the congregation, but it is clear we are able to function in less-than-optimal circumstances. Sim Shalom is the cornerstone of Progressive Jewish life in Budapest, and should remain so for the foreseeable future.

February 26, 2009
Gabor Radvanszki
President
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