

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

if any knowledge of things Jewish and especially Hebrew. They did not know the synagogue because they had not grown-up in it and they were totally unfamiliar with the service. Thus, the first young man asked why the rabbis couldn't explain the Torah portion before reading it as he had heard it done in other countries. There was more, however, that he was looking for. He wanted the synagogue to be the focal point not only of religious life, but cultural life as well. He put forward the suggestion that open lectures should be held there and they should be advertised for all to attend. He complained that up to now the synagogue had not provided a place where people could meet each other socially and grow together culturally and communally. He was also concerned with Jews in the provinces, the isolated ones, and how important it was to enable social gatherings for them. He concluded by saying that the future was dependant upon two things - learning and social life.

The third person who spoke asked the following question: What activities are the Jewish community promoting? This person announced himself as a student of literature at the University and not religious. He suggested there were about 100,000 Jews making up the Budapest community, a third of whom belong in some form or another. He also raised the problem of the synagogue and its function. He said that the synagogue should be brought closer to the people not vice versa and the synagogue was not only about religion. People should also feel themselves a part of the community. In fact, the synagogue, he suggested, was the last step in learning about Judaism. First, Jews should come together; second they should study and socialize; only then should religion come into it.

Rabbi Schweitzer then responded. He said that when he had assumed the principalship of the Rabbinical Seminary a few years before, he invited people to tell him what they wanted to learn, what kind of courses they wanted. He said that he had not received a single reply. On his own initiative, therefore, he offered a course on Jewish history and the only people who attended were outsiders (Christians and other people not part of the Jewish community); he discontinued it for he did not feel it was worth it. Concerning the service and the liturgy, he said that it was not possible to change it or those people who already attend regularly would leave. And it was not possible to alienate them. Finally, he hoped that some course could be offered to those interested within a 'framework of reality'.

The Rabbi of Bethlen Synagogue, Rabbi Landesmann, then made some comments. With regard to the liturgy he said the point is not making it easier but learning it. He also suggested that people take the opportunity to read the Chumash and the appropriate portion before the service. This, he felt would enable people to understand what the Torah was all about. Finally, he said that the synagogue must remain the centre of Jewish life or there would be no future for the Jewish people.

A discussion ensued after these opening comments. I cannot report everything that transpired, but it is worth pointing out that those young Jews present on the the whole, came from the generation whose parents suffered under communism or were loyal to it; thus, they knew nothing about Judaism, they were looking for intellectual stimulation through Judaism; and for them it was the community through which Jewish values would be passed on to the next generation, and 'community' to them did not always mean religious community.

Another important issue was raised by one of the rabbis - politics. He criticised the cultural approach to Judaism so favoured by a lot of the vocal young people present. He made an important distinction between 'Jewish life' and 'Jewishness' saying that Jewish life depended not on people but politics. Jewishness on the other hand was eternal. He saw the community's task to restore Jews because culture was run, he felt by some 'scientific institute' somewhere in the political world. People should not occupy themselves, he said with the politics of Jewish life because it was out of their hands and at the same time so volatile.

I was fortunate to be able to attend this meeting; I was even more fortunate that one of the friends of WUPJYS who spoke good English was sitting next to me translating the proceedings so I could take notes. In the middle of the meeting she herself interjected saying that this type of discussion was 'rare'; she added that 'there is something in the air about to happen. It's an extreme situation', and I presumed she meant this for both the rabbis and the young people present. One might characterise the gap between the young Jewish people and the rabbis as a dichotomy - Jewish culture versus Jewish religion, the former favouring Jewish culture, the latter the Jewish religion.

This meeting at the Bethlen Synagogue took place on our last evening in Budapest after having spent four days with the friends of WUPJYS. It made clear to me that the latter were not alone in their search; and furthermore that their fears, anxieties and suspicions about the established religion were not exclusive to them but shared with a growing number of young Jews who do not know where to turn.

THE RELIGIONISTS

During our stay we had the opportunity to meet 'representatives' of two other sections of the Budapest Jewish community - one the Chief Rabbi whose name is Dr Alfred Schoner, and the editor of the local Jewish newspaper called 'New Life', whose name is Dr Stephen Doman. The aptness of the title of the newspaper comes from the fact that it was established just after World War II had ended. Dr Doman related a number of important facts about the Jewish community to us. Though there are still significant ideological and practical difficulties between the larger Neologue section and the smaller Orthodox one (sermons in the orthodox synagogues are still preached in Yiddish), relations between the sections have never been better. The irony of the situation, he suggested, is that it took the advent of a secular overtly atheistic political regime to bring the two sections of the community to the point of acknowledging each others existence.

I asked Dr Doman what Jewish Christian relations are like at the present time. His answer was somewhat hopeful but cautious. He said that whereas some of the Christian clergy on the top of the hierarchy are willing to pay lip-service to the notion of dialogue between church and synagogue, this is not necessarily the case lower down, in fact he was concerned that the liberalisation of the State release old elements of anti-semitism. He also said that no formally recognised mechanism exists to bring Jews and Christians together in dialogue. A lot of work needed doing in this work of reconciliation, and I got the

impression that they do not know where or how to begin the process.

Political liberalisation also came up in our conversation. Here Dr Doman was also cautious; he felt that the present openness even encouragement on behalf of the Government could change over night. The situation is this. The Government is encouraging the synagogues to play a more active role in the education of the children and young people. At present there is a return to the synagogue and Jewish way of life. Enrolment in adult education classes in synagogues is on the up-swing and many parents, even though they may have not have received a particularly Jewish education themselves, are sending their children to religion schools. How long it will last is not clear.

When I asked Dr Doman what he thought about the young Jews whom we had met at the Bethlen Synagogue, he replied that they were not serious, or in his words 'committed' to Judaism. They were not, he said, interested in religion, the implication being they were not serious Jews. When I suggested that they may be finding it difficult to overcome psychological, political and religious obstacles, he replied that if these young people wanted to learn, there was every opportunity for them to do so in the synagogue. There were plenty of adult classes where they could study Hebrew and learn about Judaism. That they had not found their way into the synagogue only suggested to him that they were not particularly interested in Judaism as a way of life but simply as an 'abstraction'.

Dr Doman is also the teacher of Talmud at the Rabbinical Seminary and we talked about some of his and the Seminary's needs. Uppermost in his mind was the lack of books. He told me that another edition of the Talmud was needed as they only had one, and also a Concordance of the Talmud. Apart from the fact that the Jewish community have only begun to publish the first books in Hungarian since the war, the only other way of obtaining books is by purchasing them from abroad. This can only be done with foreign currency; as a result, religious books and ones on Jewish thought are scarce and supply is in no way keeping-up with demand. A request was made for help in acquiring more books.

THE ASSIMILATIONISTS

We had the opportunity to meet some of my wife's relatives and spend time with them. Though our time together was brief, they were able to put us into the picture of another part of the Budapest Jewish community. The relatives were both Jewish. The father was brought up in a Jewish home, went to Heder until Bar-Mitzvah and by that time he was caught up in the events of the war. He managed to survive the Nazi occupation and see Budapest liberated by the Soviets. His enthusiasm for communism, as he put it, 'the most radical anti-facist and social programme' led him to join the Communist Party until he fell out of favour just after Stalin had died.

We were together with his wife and daughters, one of whom was in her late teens the other in her early twenties. The two daughters knew very little of the Jewish side of their father's story, for he along with his wife had chosen not to talk about it. Assimilation, we were told, was the only way to deal with the Jewish question. Parents did not educate their children with any sense of Jewish identity, for they believed it could only get in their way or hinder their personal and professional development

in Hungarian society. They felt that the only way their children would lead normal lives was to forget their Jewishness.

There was, however, one paradox in what the parents had to say. Their hope was their daughters Jewishness would not hinder their integration into society. At the same time they admitted that even though their daughters might abandon their Judaism, society would not forget they were Jews. There did not seem to be any defensiveness in their assimilationist position; neither he nor his wife tried to argue the point. I was left with the distinct impression that Jewish survival did not matter to them. The world would continue for better or for worse with or without the Jews.

THE FRIENDS OF WUPJYS

It is not possible to recount all that transpired between friends of WUPJYS and myself. The main purpose of my visit was to spend a Shabbat together with them and in that context teach Judaism. This is what I did. Briefly, I taught the following things :

- 1 - Under the title of 'Jew by Conviction' I tried to draw a distinction between Judaism as a philosophy on the one hand and as a religious way of life on the other. Judaism had to be lived out not in the mind alone but among a community of other Jews.
- 2 - The centrality of Hebrew in Jewish life. I encouraged them to begin learning it.
- 3 - We studied the centrality of God in Jewish belief, the development of the Torah (the notion of progressive revelation), and as an example, we looked at the Shema in Hebrew and its importance in the liturgy both past and present.
- 4 - We examined the notion of God from a personal experiential angle, taking into account Maimonides' idea of 'negative attributes'. In particular we looked at the limitations which language imposes upon our comprehension of the notion of God. We began this session with an evening service; afterwards we looked at the Amidah, its structure, its function in the liturgy after the destruction of the Second Temple and its historical development.
- 5 - In the last session we talked about the future of the friends of WUPJYS. I posed the question of the future intentionally to encourage them to think about where they might be going personally and as a group. I asked them what they wanted and what they could possibly obtain from their local Jewish environment and community. How could they live Shabbat, for example was one of the questions we looked at. I suggested they begin to use the RSGB daily and Sabbath Siddur more regularly. We spent some time going through the study anthology to point

5 out its richness for personal devotion. Although there are quite a few divorced women in the group there is one family. We asked and talked about educating the next generation. I tried to give this session as practical an orientation as possible. Considering I was leaving the next day they would have to decide for themselves how they wanted to proceed with their search for God.

I would like to add that the friends of WUPJYS, the people whom we saw, met and heard at the meeting at the Bethlen Synagogue, they are looking on the fringe of the Jewish community; for the moment they are looking in from the outside. They are thirsty for Jewish knowledge; at the same time they are wary of the religious establishment which they associate with the political regime.

CONCLUSION

The friends of WUPJYS, along with the other Jews 'on the fringe' are trying to find the threshold to the local Jewish community in Budapest, but they are unsure as to where to turn. This is why this one group has turned to WUPJYS abroad. They are not to blame for turning away from their local community, for they have been 'educated out' of their faith and their traditions in their local community and at home. The connection with the past has been severed, certainly by the catastrophic events of history; it was, however, their parents on the one hand and the State on the other which blocked the sources of faith and tradition in the post-war generation.

These young Jews had been educated out of their faith by their parents who, because of their fear of state-sponsored anti-semitism, culminating in the Nazi deportations of 1944, believe that the only solution to being Jewish was forgetting it, assimilating into the Hungarian masses. These young Jews had also been educated out of their faith by the State, in whose schools they learnt that religion is not the way forward intellectually; on the contrary, they were taught that religion is a retrogressive step. Seeing the dilemma I could not help but pose the question: how to re-educate this lost generation? but it is not so easy. It is much easier to destroy a link in a chain or a generation in the chain of tradition, much more difficult to mend it.

I found the friends of WUPJYS filled with a hope, but one laced with cynicism. They are groping in the dark, so to speak, for their religious threshold, their threshold to the synagogue; but they are finding it difficult to spot because of psychological obstacles they have inherited from home and state. They are finding it difficult to spot also because they will not be taken in so easily by the 'improved' political order.

There is no doubt that the political atmosphere in Hungary is changing. The synagogues are becoming stronger. The government is encouraging them to take a more active role in bringing up children Jewish, instilling in them traditional religious values. The friends of WUPJYS are not easily taken in. They understand that for the government, the motive is not an altruistic one; on the contrary, religion is the last instrument

to which it can resort to encourage resistance among the Hungarian youth, those youth returning to the fascist values of the 20's and 30's.

Mistrust of the State is only matched by my mistrust of the rabbonim. The rabbis in their eyes, in the eyes of these young Jewish people, are establishment figures. On the other hand the friends of WUPJYS are seen by the rabbis as 'flirting' with Judaism, not actually engaging in it. 'Religion', Dr Doman pointed out 'has become fashionable' and at best these young people are just jumping onto the bandwagon. Certainly Dr Doman was correct when he said they were not committed Jews. However they are Jews, granted, 'tentative' ones, but they are testing out the waters, looking in to see if the environment is safe.

The rabbis have their problems too. They invite young Jews to attend and learn at the Beth Midrash, but they receive no response. Moreover, how would the rabbis teach them if they wanted to come? These are adults - university educated men and women, not children and what kind of methods would be appropriate to teach these young people, considering they do not even know the Aleph Bet? How can they teach Judaism without knowledge of Hebrew?

Aviva and I only spent a short time in Budapest; yet the tensions in the community became all too apparent. There were the assimilationists who feel that the only solution to being Jewish is to forget about it. Then there are the religionists who believe the only solution is to resist 'religious fads' and remain loyal to the Neologue approach to Judaism; then lastly there are these young Jews, the friends of WUPJYS and others like them, those on the fringe of the community, those looking hard for their roots, seeking a way out of their alienated disaffected condition; they believe that religion follows from and is based on a sense of community and Jewish identification.

We left Budapest with a sense of sadness - leaving new friends behind - but also with a sense of hope. We felt an 'electricity' in the air and we both agreed that Jewry has a future in Budapest despite its tragic past.

RABBI ROBERT F SHAFRITZ

WEST LONDON SYNAGOGUE

24 JUNE 1988