

## Sim Shalom 2012 Report to EUPJ/WUPJ

During 2012 Sim Shalom Congregation in Budapest has been on a roller coaster ride concerning its status as a religious institution ("Church") and concerning a large part of its financial income. In February, the Hungarian government passed a new Church Law taking away from us the status of "Church", as well as from most of the other 140 or so small institutions previously recognized as being religious and thereby having certain associated rights and privileges.

As a consequence, we lost the right to have any supporter paying Hungarian income tax designate Sim Shalom as the recipient of 1% of the tax paid. The aggregate total of these "donations", which cost the donor nothing from his own pocket, was 25-30% of our annual income, making a tremendous hole in our budget. The second consequence was more potential, but could be much more valuable. At about the same time the new Church Law was passed, the government also required that all recognized Jewish movements (Churches) should have a proportionate share in the direct financial support that the government provides to the Jewish community in recompense for Jewish property confiscated during WWII. Presently the Orthodox and Neolog (Conservative) movements share in this money, but lacking "Church" status, we are not entitled to a share. Our share would amount annually to 2-3 times our present annual budget, which would solve all our financial problems for many years to come.

With the moral support and generous financial help of the EUPJ/WUPJ, we have instituted several appeals against the new Hungarian Church Law and its application to us. An appeal to the European Court of Human Rights, along with those from 14 other similarly affected Hungarian religious institutions, was made last summer and was acted on surprisingly fast. The court's findings in our favor were sent to the Hungarian government last fall, with a required response date that is now Feb. 23, 2013. On Dec. 8, the Hungarian Ombudsman requested the Hungarian Constitutional Court to annul the recently passed Church Law. The Hungarian Constitutional Court on Jan. 22, 2013 agreed to take our appeal for consideration on its merits. So there is hope of some changes in the situation this year due to these appeals, but how advantageous they will be remains to be seen.

The biggest new thing in our programs and outreach for this year was that we had a week long public celebration of Sukkot. It took place in a park, overlooking the Danube, and in the middle of one of the most populous Jewish districts in Budapest. From Sunday through the following Saturday, every night there was a program. We built a sukkah that seated about 40-50 people with a reed matting roof through which one could see the stars, and the whole sukkah was decorated by our children.

There were programs every evening and sometimes during the afternoon. Programs were targeted at different age groups and stages in the family life cycle. An "Ask the Rabbi" session, an interfaith round table discussion about the Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist religions' points of view on the importance of life here on earth versus in the hereafter, and a program about teaching tolerance for the Roma (Gypsies) in the schools were especially aimed at adults. Two services, Sukkot and Kabbalat Shabbat, a music evening and another of improvisational theatre were for all ages, and for the teenagers there was a dance party after Havdalah on Saturday, run by our Youth Group. What was

especially popular with the many small children was shaking the lulav every day before the main program and everyone enjoyed the Hallel Psalms which followed that.

People came from all over the city, but especially from the neighborhood of the park which has many young families, as well as retirees. Some showed their interest by coming to other events at Sim Shalom, which of course was one of our motivations. But it was just great for us to have a place to be outside together for the whole week in the Indian summer weather (well, there was rain one evening, so things had to be moved inside a local cafe!), and to get so many of our members working together.

A smaller outreach program was the Interfaith Festival of Lights we organized together with the Catholic and Unitarian churches in our neighborhood, held on Hanukah and before Christmas. It combined lighting the last lights of Hanukah with the lighting of the candles of Advent in one ceremony held outdoors on a large public square very near our synagogue. Music from both faiths was part of the ceremony, followed by a social hour in our nearby premises.

Rabbi Kelemen took part in many other events during the year to represent the viewpoint of Reform Judaism to both the greater Jewish community and to the whole of Budapest. Most notable among these were a speech at a Jewish Holocaust memorial at the shore of the Danube on the occasion of the International Anti-Fascist Day, holding a workshop at a popular weekend summer camp for young adult Jews at a lake 40 Km from Budapest, and giving a portrait interview to a very popular weekly religious newspaper.

And of course our weekly religious services and educational programs continue much as before.

Jesse Weil

Treasurer

Jan. 29, 2013