

Sim Shalom 2013 Report to EUPJ/WUPJ

2013 was again a very mixed year for us. In the congregation, we had many successes and good times and good progress at building the community. There were also many successes in our relations with the rest of the Budapest Jewish community, but also some continuing frustrations. There were many good events that brought us into close warm contact with the international Jewish world. It was only in respect to our relations with the Hungarian government that news continues to be bad and not hopeful for a quick resolution. As a result of that, our financial situation has worsened.

First the good news. Attendance at regular services continues to slowly climb. There is no problem ever to have a minyan. The cadre of those who can read Torah, which happens twice a month, slowly increases as adult Bar and Bat mitzvahs continue to occur. This year's adult education offerings are extremely popular, with over 20 people coming to the Basic Judaism II course offered biweekly and a similar number coming to the more advanced course on Pirke Avot on the alternate weeks. Last year's camp experience was a Meditative/Spirituality event over a long weekend for adults. For the second year we held a weeklong Sukkot celebration in a public park, with programs every evening and in the day on the weekends. Many non-members from the Jewish neighborhood surrounding the park came to the various programs. One of the programs for young children, featuring music, stories and crafts, was so successful that we have started to offer it once a month in the synagogue, to attract young families into the congregation. Other outreach programs included our participation in a joint Shabbat Service with other egalitarian communities on the day of the local Gay-Pride March, attended by many of the marchers, and followed by many of our members going on the march.

During the year we often have visitors to our services from other countries. Every year a confirmation class comes from Temple Shalom in Scotch Plains, NJ, led by Rabbi Joel Abraham. After being in Poland and Germany, they are glad to see the happy celebration of Shabbat in a place where Judaism was badly repressed in the Shoah. Led by Rabbi Peter Rubenstein, a large group from Central Synagogue in NYC, one of the largest and oldest of Reform Synagogues in NY attended a joint service put on by Sim Shalom and Bet Orim congregations in the Budapest JCC last November. And for the second time in as many years there was a large Netzer group that came to one of our services in the fall. These visitors always bring a very lively atmosphere with them that leads to a very meaningful service.

Sim Shalom is slowly gaining recognition in the Budapest Jewish and secular communities as being a significant representative of the Reform Movement. Our views are sought on issues like antisemitism, and we are asked to participate in affairs of importance to the greater Jewish community. However, unfortunately, this recognition does not extend to an offer of any share in the financial support that the Jewish community gets from the Hungarian government.

The bad part of the past year is that we continue to suffer from and struggle against the loss of our registration by the Hungarian government as a religious institution. The registration was taken away just two years ago as part of effort to get rid of "business" churches who were registered for the money they could collect. Though we were assured at the time that we would retain our registration, the final vote of Parliament was to take it away. With the moral support and generous financial help of the EUPJ/WUPJ, we very quickly brought suits in the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, and in the Hungarian Courts to protest against this as a violation of our religious freedom and an unwarranted and unconstitutional action under the Hungarian constitution. The Strasbourg Court agreed with us and asked for a response from the Hungarian government. Before that was required to happen, the Hungarian Ombudsman requested the Hungarian Constitutional Court to annul the recently passed Church Law, and the Hungarian government ordered the Hungarian Constitutional Court to hear our case. That court did so and made a ruling that the newly passed Church Law in which our registration was revoked was unconstitutional, and that we should be considered to be still registered. The government has ignored our appeal, based on this ruling, to have our registration restored. They said we would have to follow the provisions of the "unconstitutional" law and make an application to regain our registration, along with many other Churches who were deregistered. We made this application last September and it is now wending its way through the Hungarian bureaucracy. If it survives that hurdle, then it will go to the Parliament where it must receive a 2/3 majority vote to get us registered again. Since there will be an election this April for a new parliament, it is quite unlikely that any such vote will take place before the election. And it is not at all certain that our application will get the required 2/3 approval when it does come up for a vote. In the meantime, we have appealed to the Strasbourg Court again for them to take some further action on our behalf.

The financial consequences of not being registered are severe. We are not eligible to receive 1% of the income taxes of all our supporters. This amounted to 30% of our annual budget in the past. It has also made us ineligible to receive other grants only available to registered "churches". For instance, our local city district government just denied our application for a grant that would have paid our rent for a month, solely due to our not being registered. Not having our registration has meant we've had to make drastic reductions in our expenses. It may be that we will have to reduce or discontinue paying our Rabbi until our income increases.

But we carry on!!! The low budget celebration of the 20th Anniversary of our founding was watching some videos of the earliest days of our organization.

Jesse Weil
Treasurer
Jan. 29, 2014