

Sim Shalom 2014 Report to EUPJ/WUPJ

The past year, 2014, was like the past two, a mixture of successes, difficulties and uncertainties. The congregation's internal life continued much as in recent years, with much activity, modest growth and many joyful events involving the lives of our members. The same is true of our relations with the rest of the Jewish world, here and internationally. Only in our relations with the Hungarian government does the situation continue to be bad, with the consequence that our financial situation also continues to be very difficult.

We have maintained the number and level of our religious services and educational programs, and with weekly Kabbalat and biweekly Schacharit services. Many of our members can lead services, and can read Torah. Adult and children's educational programs continue at the same level of activity. The very popular youth group continued its biweekly meetings with discussions on Jewish ethics and some theatre evenings. Festival celebrations are highlights of the year's activities, with big turnouts for the High Holidays, Pesach and Hanukah, and even for the more minor ones of Purim with three Purim Spiels, Shavuot, and Tu' B'shvat. A highlight of Yom Kippur was the inauguration of a new Siddur for the Kol Nidre service, replacing one cobbled together more than 20 years ago. Sukkot was celebrated again for several days in a city park in a Jewish neighborhood, attracting much attention from the unaffiliated Jewish inhabitants of the area.

It was a quite active year for Jewish life cycle events in Sim Shalom. There were three adult Bat Mitzvahs celebrated, one a woman on her 60th birthday, doing the same parashah as her son did years earlier, and two women in their early 20's. And there were three conversions, one a man in his 60's and two young people, one male and one female. There were two weddings, one of which was especially meaningful. Richard Berend and his wife Judit were married 50 years ago, when civil marriages were the only possibility for an assimilated Jew in Communist Hungary unless you were a member of the small Orthodox community. Richie and Judit weren't. But for their fiftieth anniversary, they decided to finally have a traditional Jewish wedding, Huppah, seven blessings, glass breaking and all. It was a memorable and joyful occasion!

As usual, we had several visits of groups of foreigners, often young people who are exploring the resurgence of Judaism on the Continent. This year two Netzer groups came from England, and there was our annual visit by Rabbi Joel Abraham's Confirmation Class from New Jersey. Perhaps even more meaningful for the older Sim Shalom members was when Valerie Bello came with her son and daughter-in-law. Valerie and Ernest Bello were instrumental in the founding of Sim Shalom in the late 80's and early 90's by organizing frequent missionary visits of young London Jews to Budapest to teach the Hungarians how to be Jewish. The Hungarians only knew they had Jewish roots, but had no knowledge from their parents about how to practice Judaism. In March a large group of Reform and Conservative Rabbis from the German Central Rat came to Budapest to support us in protesting some unacceptable plans of the Hungarian government for celebrating the 70th anniversary of the liberation of the Holocaust death camps. And finally, Rabbi Steve Burnstein came to us from the WUPJ office in Israel in November to start planning a spring meeting on how to attract unaffiliated young Hungarian Jews into the Reform movement.

As mentioned above, there was a big problem last year with the plans announced by the Hungarian government for its recognition of the 70th anniversary of the Holocaust. Almost everything proposed was strongly objected to by the whole Hungarian Jewish community. It included the establishment, with no Jewish input, of a new Holocaust Museum, changes needed in school textbooks to correct the lack of any mention of the part played by Jews in the history Hungary, and the erection of a statue that blamed all holocaust events on Germany, and implied that the Hungarian government and various fascist militias were completely innocent of mistreating Jews. Sim Shalom Congregation joined with all the other Jewish organizations in protesting strongly against these plans. The needed school book changes were drafted by a Jewish committee and accepted by the school authorities, the museum has yet to be established, but the horrible statue was finally erected after months of protests at the site where it now stands.

Turning now to the unhappy story of our conflicts with the Hungarian government over our loss of official registration in 2012, there were several events this past year which may be leading to a resolution of that situation, but it is not a simple or easy path. The Hungarian Constitutional Court a year ago last spring delivered a decision that the passage of the new "Church" Law which took away our registration was unconstitutional, and that we should be considered to be still registered. The Hungarian government has ignored the decision of this court. Last spring, a year later, the European Court on Human Right (ECHR) in Strasbourg gave out a similar preliminary decision, which also mandated that we should receive significant monetary damages to compensate us for the financial consequences of losing our registration, which are large. The Hungarian government tried without success to appeal this decision and it became final last September, with a requirement that the financial settlement be finished by early March, 2015. We are currently in a negotiation with the government about the settlement, and they seem to be dragging their feet.

In the meantime, since the government has made no move to repeal or amend the new "Church" Law, we applied 16 months ago, under that law to regain our registration, though the process is now very difficult. Much of the past year was spent in supplying additional information to support our application and in having it vetted by various committees. Though finally accepted as technically adequate by a committee of experts on religion, it was finally rejected by a parliamentary committee on the grounds that we did not meet the criteria of "active participation in the support of civil society". In spite of their rejection last fall, they forwarded our application to be voted on by the full Parliament, where it will require a 2/3 majority for us to become registered. No vote has been taken in the past 5 months. We are not hopeful for a positive vote, and may have to appeal to the courts again.

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 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.

Feb. 3, 2015

Jesse Weil
Treasurer
Sim Shalom Congregation