

## Sim Shalom 2015 Annual Report

The past year, 2015, was like the past three, 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.

Sim Shalom has maintained the number and level of our religious services and educational programs, and with weekly Kabbalat and biweekly Shacharit services. Many of our members can lead services, and can read Torah. Our services also benefited greatly from the monthly visits of two rabbinical student interns, Armin Langer and Ariel Pollak, from the Abraham Geiger College. Mentored by Rabbi Kelemen, they brought fresh approaches and new tunes to our prayer services. On the other hand, we are missing the very spiritual and musical cantorial services of Miklos Budai, who served us for many years. He has followed his inclination for a more traditional life style and moved to be the cantor for a Neolog congregation. But our new cantor, Milan Andic, recently accepted to study in the Cantorial program of Abraham Geiger College, has provided a welcome replacement in making our services very musical. And on a positive note, after 17 years of leading the congregation, Rabbi Kelemen is going to take a much deserved Sabbatical leave April through July, when she will go to study at the Abraham Geiger College in Berlin.

Regarding life cycle events, this year there were two youth and one adult B'nei Mitzvot celebrated, the youngsters being a pair of twins who themselves were twinned with B'nei Mitzvah children from West London Synagogue as the first step of a new congregational twinning effort. The adult Bar Mitzvah was that of our new Cantor. There was a very joyful wedding of our past President, Detti Gardos. And sadly, there were funerals of two of the founding members of the congregation, who were secular leaders and very active and they are greatly missed.

It was a busy year in terms of outreach and social action, both inside and out of the Jewish community. This year Sukkot was celebrated jointly with two other groups on the premises of the Israeli Culture Center. Rabbi Kelemen presented one of the shiurs at the Shavuot All-night Study event at the JCC. A CD of the lectures of her last year's course on Introduction to Reform Judaism was published, as well short videos of her current adult course on Everyday Prayers. And finally, one of her best sermons appeared as a contribution to the book "Women Rabbis in the Pulpit", published by the Leo Baeck College. Under the leadership of Rabbi Steve Burnstein, from WUPJ, some of our former youth group are in a group of Budapest young Jews who are meeting regularly to brainstorm on new ways to build Reform in Hungary. Bella Menczer, one of these young members, has a Klal Yisrael Fellowship to take part in the year-long youth leadership training program run by the Roswell Foundation under WUPJ sponsorship. During the Budapest Gay Pride Week, Sim Shalom was a major participant in a Shacharit service at Balint Haz JCC for the Gay community and their visitors, and in the Gay Pride march that afternoon. And during the turbulent weeks last fall when the refugee/immigrant tide was washing through Hungary, we were quite active in helping provide aid and support to those unfortunate people. We raised \$1,000 from our congregants and another \$1,000 from foreign donors which was spent on rain gear, coats, tents and food. It was good that we could help show that though the Hungarian government was very unwelcoming to these desperate people, Hungarian people felt and acted very differently.

Only one positive thing has happened this past year in our ongoing battle with the Hungarian government to regain our registration as a religious organization and to get our share of the money given to the Jewish Community by the government. And that was largely due to the financial support of the EUPJ for our

legal appeal to the European Court for Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg. We did finally receive from the government 10% of the money we claimed as having been denied us due to having our registration taken away in 2012. This was the donations of 1% of each supporter's income tax that we didn't qualify for without being registered, and amounted to about \$70,000. The government would not agree to pay us the other 90% of our claim for our share of the annual restitution for Jewish property confiscated in WWII, so that claim has been returned to the ECHR for them to decide on the amount we are entitled to. We gratefully thank EUPJ for their support in this long battle.

In spite of a very strong request for less draconian Church-State relations in Hungary by German Chancellor Angela Merkel during a recent Budapest visit, and the ongoing efforts of Gergo Guba, the President of Sim Shalom, there has also been no progress whatsoever on our application under the current "Church-State Relationship" Law. Instead, the government has prepared yet another new "Church Law" which has even more stringent criteria to be satisfied in order to get registered again. Our attorney assures us that the pending application will not be allowed to come up for a vote until the new law has been adopted, making the application moot. So our only recourse will be to go again to the ECHR to ask that they somehow reinforce their earlier finding that the original de-registration was illegal, and that we are still legally registered. It's a long and difficult row we have to hoe!

Unfortunately, there is one more piece of bad news. The lease on our current quite satisfactory synagogue premises has run out, and the landlord wants to raise our rent by 50%, which we cannot afford. So we are currently looking for similar premises in a less expensive part of the city. We can only stay where we are till the end of March, and may have to seek temporary premises while we continue to search for something satisfactory and affordable for the long term.

To end on a positive note, I can report that West London Synagogue, one of the largest in England, is in the process of studying how it can support the growth of Reform Judaism in Hungary. The main agent of the study over the past 5 months has been Rosalind Copisarow, who has so far made four week-long visits to Budapest and interviewed over 100 people to learn what needs of the people here should be addressed in this long term building effort. Officers of EUPJ are also involved in this important effort.

Jesse Weil  
Treasurer  
Sim Shalom Congregation

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