

SIM SHALOM 2016 ANNUAL REPORT

2016 was, like the past four years, a mixture of success, difficulty and uncertainty. 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 Reform 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.

2016 was very much a year of transition. Rabbi Kelemen was away on sabbatical for 4 ½ months, mostly studying Talmud at the Department for Jewish Studies of Potsdam University near Berlin, and getting a much needed break from her busy life as the Congregational mainspring. In Berlin, she and her husband sampled the lively Jewish life and culture there, attending the German long-weekend Limmud, as well as services and programs at half a dozen different Reform and Masorti congregations. Lay leaders in Sim Shalom, with considerable help from Rabbinical Student, Ariel Pollak, took up the task of leading the services and some of the educational programs. Meanwhile, the congregation twice moved to basically free premises, after giving up the comfortable flat we could no longer afford. Currently we are in the Budapest JCC, Balint Haz, where we spent several years in the previous decade. Finally, we again changed cantors. Milan Andic, who was our good cantor for 1 ½ years, left in the fall to start his studies in the cantorial program of the Abraham Geiger College in Berlin. Since then, we have enjoyed the singing and very spiritual services of Flora Polnauer, who has also studied in Berlin. In spite of all these disruptions, the attendance at various programs has held up very well, attesting to the basic strength of the Congregation.

Besides the usual weekly services, holiday celebrations and educational programs, which include a very successful new Talmud course, there were a number of extraordinary events during the year. One was the baby naming of the twins born to Yvette Guba, the wife of our President. Once again we held a special Shacharit service for LGBT travelers on the weekend of the local Gay Pride March. We also had a joint service with the local Masorti congregation on the occasion of their International Masorti Youth Seminar. As a protest against a very unpopular anti-immigrant referendum promoted by the government, the three Progressive (Reform and Masorti) congregations held a joint Shabbat service to show solidarity with the immigrants. Among the guest speakers were several Christian and Muslim members of like-minded non-Jewish organizations. Rabbi Kelemen has recently joined the international organization, National Democratic Institute (NDI) whose local program in the four Visegrad nations is forming an inter-religious and inter-ethnic coalition to create projects working against prejudice in the majority society. They are holding some several-day workshops as they build their organization. Among the groups visiting Sim Shalom during the year were a group of London teen agers led by a former British member of Sim Shalom, Nick Young, whose wife is Hungarian, and a large delegation from the GIL Reform Congregation in Geneva, led by Alex Dembitz, Vice-President of EUPJ and President of GIL. Rabbi Francois Garai, of GIL, delighted us with his fine voice, both during the service and at dinner.

The West London Synagogue (WLS) Budapest Project Committee, led by Rabbi David Mitchell, and now with participation of EUPJ, made several visits here last year. Rosalind Copisarow carried out the study of the needs of the Jewish community of Budapest, and the Project Committee made plans on how to contribute to the further growth of the Reform community here. The current plan has two main thrusts. One is to hire Rabbi Ariel Pollak, a Hungarian who is recently graduated from Abraham Geiger College in Berlin and who did a year of internship under Rabbi Kelemen's supervision in 2015-16, to make monthly visits to Budapest. He will put on programs/services which will attract unaffiliated young Hungarian Jews to some practice of Judaism, much as he has been doing in Berlin. The other is to continue the current plan of encouraging twinning of Bat and Bar Mitzvah celebrations as a way of building human bridges between WLS and Sim Shalom, and of giving some small financial support.

Our relationships to both the Neolog (Orthodox lite) Jewish Community and the Hungarian government continue to be adversarial. Once again we have brought a lawsuit in the European Court for Human Rights (ECHR) against the Hungarian government for the financial damage they have caused us by taking away our registration as a recognized religious institution in 2012. Our last such suit was partially successful. However the part of our previous suit in the same court for a much larger amount was finally decided against us. The reason given was that it was "...an internal matter in the Jewish Community..." in which they could not intervene.

Jesse Weil
Treasurer
Sim Shalom Congregation

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