

Sparks of Life: Impressions of Hungary on Shabbat Zachor

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March 3, 2012*

Although I have just returned from Israel, my thoughts are much more focused on Europe, where I davened last Friday night at a synagogue with a group of 30 rabbis in Budapest, Hungary, and on Saturday morning at a very different shul. Both represent and reflect what I saw and experienced in Budapest.

This was the second time I was in Budapest. Both times were with the Rabbinic Cabinet of the JFNA, Jewish Federations of North America. Hungary was still under communist domination at the time of my first visit in 1985. We saw a remnant of a community devastated by the Holocaust that was hanging on, forced to be submissive and docile and that had to repress and be cautious about any outward expression of Judaism. The Dohany Synagogue, the second largest in the world was a mere shell of its former majesty, with plans and hopes that they would be able to raise the funds to restore the building. We met a few young Jews, there was a nursery school, but most of the community was elderly, and most of the services provided by the Jewish community were directed at helping them live out their lives in dignity.

Last Friday we started our tour of Budapest in the beautiful, impressive Dohany Synagogue. Thanks to the generosity of Bernard Schwartz, (who you may know better as Tony Curtis), the synagogue was restored to its former glory. Although historically Hungarian Jews are not particularly religious, on the High Holidays all 6,000 seats of the massive sanctuary are filled. During the winter though, since it is so expensive to heat the cavernous structure, services are held in the adjacent synagogue known as the Heroes' Temple. Built after World War I, it acquired its name to remind Hungarians of the sacrifices made by so many Jews who fought and died in World War I. The style of the service is what is called "Neologue", an interesting mixture that borrows elements from Reform, Conservative and Orthodox. Uniquely Hungarian, although men and women do not sit together, it has an organ and choir.

The next morning the rabbis fanned out and went to different synagogues. I accompanied about a dozen of my conservative colleagues and we joined about a dozen young Hungarian Jews at an informal minyan. The Masorti conservative minyan meets in an apartment, sponsored by the Moshe House. The unanticipated joy of seeing these young people singing beautiful melodies in a place where Jewish life was supposed to be extinguished was amazing. Their mere presence and quest to express their Jewish identity was a testimony to the defiance of the concerted efforts by forces of the 20th century who had conspired, determined to exterminate Judaism.

Before World War II, Jews constituted almost 5 % of the population. Assimilated and integrated into Hungary, they achieved great commercial success and had reached positions of prominence in the intelligentsia and most professions, with 23 % of Budapest being Jewish. That's right, almost 25%, which is why it was sometimes called "Jewdapest." Before World War II there were 150 active synagogues, today there are only 23. 565,000 were murdered during World War II, leaving only 260,000 Jews who survived a once thriving community of over 825,000.

Despite their best efforts to acculturate and assimilate, the Jews of Hungary have been dealt a double whammy – first the Holocaust, and then Communism. The period of Soviet rule brought its own restrictions and devastation, as many Jews were afraid to let anyone know they were Jewish. Even those who attend Jewish events are reluctant to officially register as Jews or to join or become official members of Jewish organizations, for they fear the consequences. Instead, many hide or disguise their identity and do not even tell their own children they are Jewish.

Yet somehow, here we were, on a Saturday morning singing the shema, davening the amidah, reading Torah, and witnessing the inspiring effort to keep the flame of Judaism alive. The prayers of these young people meant that a Jewish community that should have disappeared is singing hallel rather than saying kaddish.

Part of what keeps Judaism alive is because of the work of the American Jewish community. What many Jews do not realize is that our contributions to our local Jewish Federation support two organizations that support Jewish life overseas, the Joint and the Jewish Agency for Israel.

Most of the young people we met did not even know they were Jewish until they were teenagers. So what to do with this once you learn who you are?

A common theme to the revival is that many found themselves at a camp, known as Sarvasz, where their Judaism comes alive during the summer. About 1,500 kids from all across Eastern Europe descend on the summer camp each year, as if it is a magnet and magical place. In the past 25 years over 25,000 young people are alumni of the camp, who became ambassadors, agents and leaders of renewal. After being introduced to the vibrancy of Jewish life, they hunger for more and search out other opportunities to connect with Judaism and other Jews. They turn to programs at the Balint Jewish Community Center or the Israel Cultural Center, all places where they come to express and explore, discover and delve into the very things we take for granted. Birthright is another program which has helped them discover their Judaism, all programs sponsored and supported by contributions made by members of the American Jewish community.

On Saturday afternoon after a filling cholent lunch we went to a “shabbat club” at the Israel Cultural Center. I sat in a small group with a young Hungarian Jew who learned when he was 16 that he was Jewish, as he said, “by accident.” One day while watching a television program about the Holocaust with his father he started to ask questions. As he probed, his father told him, something he had never told him previously: that he was Jewish. With my colleague, Rabbi Susan Shankman from Washington Hebrew, we discussed a text prepared by the Jewish Agency by the late great Orthodox Rabbi Soloveitchik.

As we began to discuss the difference between the concept of the covenant God made with the Jewish people at Mt. Sinai and in Egypt, I realized that the young man was not familiar not just with the terms, but that he did not know the story of the exodus, or what had happened in Egypt, and certainly not at Sinai. A little bit of probing revealed that although he was 31 years old, he had never been to a Passover seder in his life.

Another young woman had told me just a few moments earlier that she had just come from her grandfather’s apartment that day, and that he had opened up and told her and her sister just a few hours earlier for the very first time in his life about his experiences during the Holocaust.

Today is Shabbat Zachor, the Sabbath of remembrance. It is as if these memories are hanging on by a thread, and hopefully will be passed on before they are lost altogether.

What were the signs of remembrance we saw?

The first afternoon we arrived in Hungary we went to a memorial for Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who saved the lives of thousands of Jews by courageously issuing them passports, where the American ambassador and members of a delegation from the U.S. House of Representatives laid a wreath to honor his courage. We went to the ceremony from a meeting in an ornate room with the Hungarian Foreign Minister who knew that we were there on behalf of our fellow Jews.

A Holocaust memorial at the Jewish cemetery memorialized the names of the victims. Amidst the stones we recited kaddish and the Eyl Molei Rahamim memorial prayer.

The third place of remembrance we visited in addition to the Holocaust Museum was the “Shoes on the Danube Memoria,l” dedicated in 2005 to the Jews who were rounded up and killed in the waning months of the war by the local Nazi Arrow Cross Militia. The Hungarian Nazis gathered them from the ghetto and brought them to the edge of the water where they ordered them to take off their shoes so that their bodies would fall into the river and carry them away. They tied the Jews together to save bullets, as the weight of those falling in the water would carry others with them. The portrayal of the variety of shoes left behind on the bank reminds us that each victim is an individual, a precious, unique life that was lost.

During the communist regime no memorials were allowed to be built to testify to what the Nazis had done to the Jews. If there were any memorials at all, they were for victims of Fascism. Even the power of memory was taken from us.

But somehow, the spirit of Judaism refuses to allow itself to be extinguished. The Balint JCC was packed on a Sunday afternoon teeming with activities with everything from a jazz concert, an exercise room, a discussion on Jewish identity *for 20 something's* with quotes from Woody Allen and others, programs for parents, kids and tots, and more. We sat in on one program that is an ongoing dialogue between young people and elderly Jews who discuss their experiences for eight months and then travel together to Israel. It is an effort to break down barriers, and to pass on traditions and preserve memory. As one of the young girls told us, “I have a new hobby. I collect grandparents.”

The Baal Shem Tov said, “Remembering is the source of redemption, while forgetting leads to exile.” As the Etz Hayim commentary adds, “Our identities have been shaped by those who came before us.” May we do all we can to keep memory alive.

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March 3, 2012
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