



## Budapest Beginning

A WHIRLWIND VISIT DEMYSTIFIES HUNGARY



Children looking at a map of the Budapest ghetto; Rabbi Dovid Keleti (inset)

**B**udapest. The name conjures up something that was foreign throughout my childhood and well into my adult years.

I am mostly of Lithuanian heritage, and even the *chasidische* part of me is *Poishish*. So when I was informed that the whirlwind 36-hour trip I was going to be taking to Vienna would end with a late afternoon *siyum* and evening in Hungary, I really wasn't sure what to expect. Would I be able to get a flavor of what Jewish Hungary once was and discern its uniqueness, despite its post-war state of devastation?

In truth, though, I was very intrigued by the people I would meet and their struggles to reestablish the glory that once was.

It's a few hour drive from Vienna to Budapest, and a brief stop to *daven* at the *kever* of the Chasam Sofer set the stage for a visit that epitomized the centuries-old struggle for the heart and soul

of Hungarian Jewry.

Once upon a time Budapest was the center of a thriving Jewish community. But it was also the heart of the Neolog Movement, a powerful faction of Jews that although not quite as radical as Abraham Geiger's Reform Movement in Germany, still sought to subtly liberalize *Yiddishkeit* and abolish many of the sacred *tefillos* and practices that the *gedolei Yisrael* fought valiantly to uphold. Led by philosophers such as Isaac Noah Mannheimer and Leopold Löw, who is wearing a large *yarmulke* in one famous picture, the Neologs rode the coattails of the spirit of religious emancipation that was sweeping across the Austro-Hungarian Empire. With the passing of the Chasam Sofer in 1839 the movement grew even more influential, once its most outspoken opponent was no longer alive.

I was traveling with Rav Dovid

Hofstedter and Rav Shlomo Rozenshtein; their goal was to kick-start a *Dirshu Daf Yomi* in *halachah* program in Budapest. While they would be staying overnight in a hotel, I was fortunate to be hosted by Rabbi Dovid Keleti, the *rav* of Budapest, which provided me a unique opportunity to learn about the history of *Yiddishkeit* in Hungary as well as observe the *mesiras nefesh* of the Keleti family.

Unlike many others who have assumed rabbinical roles in Eastern Europe in recent years, Rabbi David Keleti was born in Hungary, in the famous city of Debrecin. Both of his parents were Holocaust survivors, his father having lost a wife and three children in Auschwitz. Rabbi Keleti's mother was his father's second wife, the younger sister of his first wife. Rabbi Keleti recounted the trauma his mother experienced during the war when she saw gentile neighbors in her town of Földes

cheering during the deportation of their Jewish neighbors to Auschwitz.

He also told me that at first he was home-schooled, but then left Hungary with his parents for Eretz Yisrael, where he eventually became a *talmid* of Rav Nochum Partzovitz, the late *rosh yeshivah* of Mir in Jerusalem.

For almost ten years Rabbi Keleti has headed *Lativ—L'maan Tichyeh Yahadus B'Hungaria* (For the Sake of the Revival of Judaism in Hungary)—a *kollel* and learning center intended to rekindle the Torah spirit of Hungarian Jewry. Based in Budapest, he and several *yungeleit* from both Hungary and Israel give *shiurim* and host programs and seminars for men and women, many of whom have gone on to learn in Eretz Yisrael.

When I arrived at the Keletis' home on Eötövös Street that afternoon, I was

being culturally Jewish, I could sense the *rav's* passion to create *bnei Torah* who will be able to pick up a *gemara* or *Mishnah Berurah* and experience the joy of Torah comprehension. I was served a wonderful lunch, a variety of grilled fish with delicious Hungarian spices. But the conversation was even more spicy as Rabbi Keleti shared some of his frustrations in his efforts to revitalize the Hungarian capital. One of his chief lamentations was the need to constantly relocate the *Lativ* center, due to the high price of real estate and the difficulty in finding a suitable facility. In fact, just days before my visit the center's most recent rental was sold, forcing *Lativ* out.

As a fundraiser, I couldn't imagine that there weren't any wealthy Hungarian Jews, survivors of the war or their descendants who wouldn't invest in a permanent location for *Lativ*. We shared some names of

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shocked to see my conception of what a prewar European apartment would look like come to life. The place was brimming with boxes of food, and a massive pot filled with chunks of meat simmering in a red sauce was bubbling away on a single burner in a corner. The whole room was redolent with the intoxicating aroma of Hungarian paprikash. This was truly Hungarian goulash *mid'oraisa!* Anything I had ever eaten before with the same name paled in comparison to this delicacy, which was being cooked in preparation for a small *siyum* and launching of a commitment to join the *Dirshu Daf Yomi B'Halachah* program.

Unlike Vienna, which has an established *frum* community, Rabbi Keleti and his son explained to me that Budapest was just beginning to redevelop. While many in the community, especially those who still espouse Neolog ideals, are satisfied with

local Lawrence residents, some of whom have been supporting his efforts for years.

Rabbi Keleti told me that it was Rav Aharon Leib Shteinman who pushed him the hardest to stay in Budapest, explaining the importance of saving an entire community. Up until then Rabbi Keleti had been traveling back and forth to Israel, but he rose to the challenge and relocated.

With only a few hours for a walking tour of the old city of Budapest I was eager to see some of its old *shuls* and historical Jewish sites. Fortunately, the stroll I took to *daven Minchah* and the *siyum* that followed opened my eyes and mind, and most importantly, my heart. ●

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