



# World Union for Progressive Judaism

## האיגוד העולמי ליהדות מתקדמת

President: Ruth Cohen

Executive Director: Rabbi Uri Regev

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## WUPJnews

*The World Union for Progressive Judaism strengthens modern, pluralistic Jewish communal life throughout the world by establishing and supporting congregations and related institutions.*

*The World Union is the leading worldwide body combining Jewish religious tradition with modern liberal values.*

*The World Union for Progressive Judaism is committed to inclusiveness, gender equality, and individual autonomy based on educated choice.*

*The World Union for Progressive Judaism advances social justice and equal*

### IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE:

**REPORT ON A VISIT TO [GERMANY](#), [HUNGARY](#), AND [POLAND](#), JULY 15-25, 2004, BY RABBI JOEL OSERAN, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, WORLD UNION FOR PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM**

## International News

### GERMANY, JULY 15-18

What a difference a single year has made in the progress and accomplishments of our German movement! Many will remember that just last July, the WUPJ organized its historic anniversary commemoration [see WUPJnews #105 - ed] marking 75 years since the first WUPJ international convention, which took place in Berlin in 1928. The commemoration, which coincided with last year's annual UPJ conference and was attended by a high-level World Union delegation, generated considerable attention within both the Jewish and general German community. Together, the two events enabled us to focus both domestic and international attention on the difficulties the German movement had been experiencing in its struggle for recognition and funding by the Zentralrat, the Central Council of Jews in Germany, and we intentionally invited German Interior Minister Otto Schily to speak at the event, knowing his supportive position on the matter.

During the past year, leaders of the UPJ, including Jan Muehlstein (President), Katerina Seidler (VP), Ingrid Wettberg (board member), and Rabbi Walter Homolka (World Union board member and head of the newly-established Abraham Geiger rabbinic seminary), maintained steady pressure on the Zentralrat. In addition, the World Union, led by Executive Director Rabbi Uri Regev, played a critical advocacy role behind the scenes.

It is likely that the combination of sustained pressure - including the UPJ's bold threat to bring legal action against the state for failing to ensure that government funding is fairly distributed - succeeded in shifting the Zentralrat's position. Evidence of the improving relationship could be seen this year at the opening session of the 10th annual UPJ Conference, where it was my privilege to convey greetings on behalf of the WUPJ leadership and international membership. I stressed the importance of Germany in our growing agenda and pledged to maintain support for the UPJ's struggle for full participation and privileges within the Zentralrat structure. Following my presentation, the conference participants were addressed by a high-ranking Zentralrat official who spoke most positively about future cooperation. Mention was also made regarding immediate funding the Zentralrat is prepared to provide for specific UPJ and Geiger College projects.

This is a real breakthrough in Zentralrat-UPJ relations. We all hope the new spirit of cooperation will continue to be strengthened in the coming months. We are cautiously optimistic it will.

An unmistakable area of growth during this past year has been the work of Adi Weichselbaum, who heads the youth program of the UPJ. There was a large and spirited youth leader delegation at the conference, Netzer-age madrichim who were preparing for their national camp during the month of August.

Adi has been investing all his efforts toward creating that vital core of youth leaders capable of attracting younger participants and communicating the essential message of our movement.

***rights for all as a  
Jewish  
imperative, in the  
spirit of tikkun  
olam (improving  
the world)***

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This summer's camp registration is the highest ever - nearly 90 participants - and the excitement generated by the youth programs was clearly felt by all conference delegates. Adi and his team ran a major Saturday evening program that presented the Netzer message of Jewish identity, Israel and Zionism, and community building. Adi interviewed several key individuals (from adult leaders to youth leaders), who shared their perspectives on the importance of youth for the future of the UPJ, and screened a wonderful video documentary highlighting previous camp experiences and Netzer-related activities during the year. It was an inspirational evening that brought great honor to Netzer Germany, and to the UPJ as well.

The tremendous growth of the German movement, and of the Jewish community in Germany in general, is primarily due to the vast influx of Jews from the FSU - estimated at over 100,000 during the past decade. Many of our UPJ congregations are primarily Russian-speaking, though the younger generation is quickly learning German and integrating fully into German society.

When planning the education components of the conference, the organizers approached the World Union with a special request: Would we finance the travel of Rabbi Sasha Lyskovi, our rabbi in St. Petersburg, Russia, to come and teach the many Russian speakers who would be attending the conference? We agreed immediately. Sasha worked diligently from morning to evening teaching the "Russian Language Track" at the conference. All of his sessions were well-attended, and we should be proud of the way our FSU movement and its rabbis are actually giving back so much to our international movement!

As for the conference itself, nearly 200 members of the 15 UPJ-affiliated communities, including a large contingent of youth and young adults active in Netzer and the "Young and Jewish" project, were in attendance. One of the conference highlights for me personally was the opportunity to present a Torah scroll, given to the World Union in May by Rabbi Henry Sobel of Congregacao Israelita Paulista in Sao Paulo, Brazil (see WUPJnews #115 - ed), to three leaders of the UPJ congregation in Bad Pyrmont at the start of the Torah reading service on Shabbat morning. The convergence of "Jewish history" into that one powerful moment was extraordinary: A Torah scroll is carried out of central Europe prior to World War II to ensure its safety and bring hope to the nascent Progressive community in Sao Paulo. Over 70 years later, the Progressive community in Brazil - strong and possessing numerous Torah scrolls of its own - returns the original scroll "home," to a congregation being revived in the shadows of the Holocaust. Bad Pyrmont is a congregation primarily composed of Russian speakers; the Torah will be officially dedicated on Simchat Torah in October with the help of a Russian-speaking Leo Baeck College student. One could live to 120 many times over and never take part in such a ceremony! It was a picture, indeed, to witness these three congregational leaders take into their arms this Torah scroll - and to appreciate the subtle yet profound role the World Union played to ensure that this moment came about. (I can't describe how humble I felt - perhaps even vindictive - to be coming to Germany from Israel, and with a Torah scroll!)

The teaching faculty at the conference consisted of several outstanding figures. I was delighted that Rabbi Sandy Ragins, Rabbi Emeritus of Leo Baeck Temple in Los Angeles, was invited to lecture and present the Drasha on Shabbat morning. I knew Sandy when I was in LA serving as rabbi of University Synagogue (1982-86). Rabbi Ragins is a scholar of German history and intellectual thought, and was a most welcome addition to the conference. Other lecturers included Rabbi Robert Jacobs (Maryland, USA), who has volunteered his time in previous conferences; Professor Admiel Kosman (Abraham Geiger College); and Irit Raub-Michelsohn (Executive Director of the UPJ).

During my stay in Germany, I also had the pleasure of spending time with several rabbinic students from Geiger College in Potsdam outside Berlin. It is abundantly clear that our growing movement must have rabbis to lead it, and that Geiger College will be the institution to meet this need; already, UPJ congregations are "fighting over" Geiger students to lead Shabbat and holiday services! From discussions with Geiger College head Rabbi Walter Homolka, it is also clear that there is much room for cooperation between the seminary and the World Union, especially regarding rabbinic students who come to study in Israel as part of their training program.

The 10th annual UPJ Conference demonstrated, once again, the critical role our international movement must play in the support of our regional groupings. Outside North America, Progressive Judaism is a distinct minority segment of the larger local Jewish community. It often is beleaguered and subject to discrimination and vilification. The regional Progressive Jewish movements have tremendous potential to attract new members because our message is indeed most suited to 21st century Jewish life. However, without the World Union to help level the playing field, local congregations will be fighting an uphill battle 24/7.

My presence at the UPJ Conference was both personal and symbolic. Indeed, I was there as Joel Oseran, who heads the World Union's international efforts, networks with colleagues, builds new

programs, encourages new leaders, and the like. But equally important (if not more so), I was there as the representative of our worldwide movement, bringing the voice of 1.5 million Reform Jews into the worship service, the meeting rooms, the study halls, and the informal exchanges with our devoted local leaders.

Working in Germany for Progressive Judaism is a lonely and exhausting undertaking. The local leadership (Jan, Katerina, Ingrid, Rachel, Adi, Debbie, Werner, Margarita and Walter) must be made to know that they are not alone - that they have partners who are honored to be with them on the front lines of a sacred battle to revive Jewish life where the Progressive Movement was born, and where so many of our people were persecuted and killed for no other reason than their being Jewish.

Many in our World Union family have joined the effort. There are rabbis across America and Europe with family roots in Germany, who are committed to the renewal of German Jewish life. And there are World Union volunteers stepping up to fill critical positions of leadership to help move the UPJ forward.

Together, our world movement and our UPJ will succeed to re-establish a creative, meaningful and enlightened Jewish presence in Germany. It is not our place to ask why – instead, it is our responsibility to help secure the Jewish future.

[Back to "In This Issue"](#)

### **HUNGARY, JULY 18-21**

I left Berlin (lighter in weight by one Torah scroll) for Budapest on Sunday night, July 18. I was especially eager to spend a few days in Budapest with Rabbi Kati Keleman and the leadership of Congregation Szim Shalom, as I had never before visited the city as part of my WUPJ work. Moreover, Budapest was the site of the May, 2004, General Assembly of the European Council of Jewish Communities (ECJC). The Assembly generated significant media attention when the World Union, with Rabbi Uri Regev taking the lead, objected to the fact that one of its sponsors - MAZSIHISZ, the Central Body of Hungarian Jewry - had refused to accept Szim Shalom into its fold. Suffice it to say, this advocacy effort raised the profile of Szim Shalom (and the World Union) within the ECJC, and within MAZSIHISZ itself. (Also of note is the fact that the incoming ECJC president is Jonathan Joseph, a member of the British Reform Movement. We look forward to working closely with Mr. Joseph in an effort to establish greater cooperation between our organizations.)

I met Rabbi Keleman and a number of other Szim Shalom leaders at the modest congregational center in the Buda section of the city. The facility is a rented apartment in a residential building. The apartment consists of a small office, kitchen and dining/living room. The latter has a lovely Aron Kodesh in the corner with two Torah scrolls and can seat, at most, about 50 people.

Rabbi Keleman grew up in Budapest and attended Leo Baeck College, where she was ordained in 1998. She was joined at our meeting by George Hajnal, who is Szim Shalom's Vice President. (The President, Gabor Kalmon, was away in New York on business.) Also present were Christi Szago, a member of the congregation's Board of Directors, and Peter Radyanszki, who directs the congregation's youth activities.

Szim Shalom was established in 1992 as a civil, non-religious association, the original goal being for it to become a religious congregation within the communal structure of MAZSIHISZ. However, MAZSIHISZ opposed this from the very beginning, and has rejected Szim Shalom's application for membership several times on the grounds that MAZSIHISZ-affiliated congregations must accept Halacha and operate according to the laws of the Shulchan Aruch.

There are approximately 100,000 Jews in Hungary, with over 80,000 in Budapest alone. The vast majority of the 11 working congregations in Budapest today (with 22 additional congregations spread out across the country) are identified with the Neologue religious orientation, which is somewhat similar to the right wing of the Conservative Movement. There is a Neologue rabbinic seminary in Budapest supported in part by the Conservative Movement's Jewish Theological Seminary.

After my meetings with Rabbi Keleman and the board, it was arranged for me to have a personal visit with Andreas Heisler, President of MAZSIHISZ. I insisted that Rabbi Keleman and George Hajnal attend with me, as the long-term impact of such meetings is rooted in relationships developed by local leaders.

Mr. Heisler's office is in the MAZSIHISZ building, which is adjacent to the famous Doheny Synagogue, the largest in Europe, with a seating capacity of over 3,000. It has been fully renovated and attracts Jewish and non-Jewish tourists alike.

The meeting with Mr. Heisler was very cordial and we hope to see positive results. He was leaving for New York the next morning to attend the Claims Conference, and would not normally have agreed to stay for so late a meeting, so I appreciated the special effort he made to fit us into his hectic schedule.

Mr. Heisler expressed understanding for Szim Shalom's situation. We made a special request for MAZSIHISZ to make available premises for Szim Shalom, which has outgrown its current facility, and he promised to look into the matter and review all suitable property. We agreed to maintain contact in order to keep personal channels of communication open and constructive.

I promised Rabbi Keleman that I would someday return to Budapest to see more of Szim Shalom in action. The congregation had just completed its annual family camp, which affords a wonderful opportunity for all ages to spend an extended Shabbat weekend together in study, prayer and community building. I encourage all of you to pay a visit to our friends at Szim Shalom. Budapest is a beautiful city and a Jewishly-important center. I am sure you will be delighted.

[Back to "In This Issue"](#)

### **POLAND, JULY 21-25**

I left Budapest very early in the morning of July 21 for Warsaw. Our World Union congregation there, called Beit Warszawa, has grown tremendously during the past year, due in part to its use of a new facility for services and activities.

The new facility is located in an attractive part of the city and has been made available to the congregation by its principal supporter, Severyn Ashkenazi, a Polish-born Jewish businessman who divides his time between Poland and the US. The facility (actually a large residence) includes a sizeable room for services (80 people can sit comfortably) housing an Aron Kodesh and two Torah scrolls; another large hall for receptions and activities; a complete kitchen for the preparation of Shabbat evening meals; and lovely balconies and a garden. The top floor includes several bedrooms, two of which are available for hosting visiting rabbis and guests. I am grateful to Mr. Ashkenazi and the congregation for allowing me to occupy the residence during my visit.

Beit Warszawa is the most dynamic Jewish group in Warsaw today. It offers educational activities and/or cultural programs nearly every day of the week. Shabbat evening services attract nearly 75 people on average and are followed by a spectacular dinner and Oneg Shabbat. The night I was there, services were led by Scott Perlo, a very talented third-year rabbinic student from the University of Judaism in Los Angeles who has been volunteering with Beit Warszawa for the summer. The hall was completely full. Guests included the Israeli Ambassador to Poland and several foreign tourists. I delivered the sermon and used the opportunity to highlight the miraculous revival of Jewish life in Poland, as witnessed in the activities of Beit Warszawa. Following Shabbat dinner there was a concert given by two opera singers who volunteered their talents to help Beit Warszawa move forward.

In meetings with Mr. Ashkenazi and Beit Warszawa's president, Jan Weinsberg, we discussed the exciting development that, with sufficient funds now having been raised, Beit Warszawa can begin the search for a full-time rabbi. We spoke at length about the particular qualities the congregation would need in a rabbi, and how we should go about finding suitable candidates.

The opportunity to engage a full-time rabbi for Beit Warszawa may turn out to be the single most important factor for the future of the congregation. Having its own synagogue facility and rabbi, Beit Warszawa will attract the attention of world Jewry as a powerful example of the Jewish will to live.

One cannot set foot in Poland without being aware of its awesome, tragic history: the loss of 3 million Jewish souls; the concentration and death camps in every direction; the heroic, and ultimately tragic, saga of the Warsaw Ghetto; the destruction of the entire city of Warsaw at the hands of the Nazis. So much death, so much pain. (As I write these words, the world is commemorating the 60th anniversary of the ill-fated Warsaw uprising.)

Yet here, in the middle of a city once destroyed, arises a community committed to the Jewish future. Few of its members fully understand what Jewish life truly means. Most have lived assimilated lives - some even being raised as non-Jews, only to be told as adults that they are Jewish and were saved from death by non-Jewish foster parents seeking only to keep them alive. Every Jew alive today and living in Poland has a story. Beit Warszawa is a library of stories, each more amazing than the last.

I am so proud that we at the World Union have brought Beit Warszawa into our fold. In July, 2003,

the Word Union's European Region officially accepted Beit Warszawa into the movement. We have a responsibility to help this community - not out of pity and not out of guilt. We will help Beit Warszawa blossom because our Jewish tradition compels us to choose life – and perhaps nowhere is this message more compelling and more poignant than in Poland.

[Back to "In This Issue"](#)

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