

THE FRANTIC RACE TO SAVE HUNGARY'S JEWS



Although Rabbi David Keleti, head of the Lativ *kiruv* organization, was only eight when his family fled Hungary, he always felt a responsibility for the Jews they left behind.

By Yehudah Marks

Rabbi David Keleti was only eight years old when the short-lived Hungarian Revolution was crushed by Soviet Russia in 1956, but he remembers it vividly.

"The communist police entered our home in Debrecin and confiscated the keys to our jewelry store," Rabbi Keleti recalls. They were ordered to change their surname from Klein to Keleti, and a year later the family decided to leave Hungary for good, along with many other Jews.

"Hungary was in a real mess after the Soviets crushed the revolt, and most of the Jews left. But while many went to America, Europe, and even Australia, my parents chose to move to Eretz Yisrael," Rabbi Keleti says.

In Eretz Yisrael, Rabbi Keleti learned

Rabbi David Keleti

in Yeshivas Mir and became a close *talmid* of Harav Nachum Partzovitz, after which he became a *maggid shiur* in Yeshivas Meoros HaTorah in Telshe Stone.

Although he was only eight when he left Hungary, he always felt a responsibility for the many Jews left behind. In Budapest alone there are currently over 90,000 Jews, with several thousand scattered the Hungary's smaller villages. Finally, fifty years after leaving Hungary, Rabbi Keleti decided the time was ripe to act.

"In Hungary there was no *kiruv* activity because the Hungarians are very proud of their language and only speak Hungarian. This language barrier has prevented activists from working in *kiruv* in Hungary," says Rabbi Keleti.

He himself stopped speaking Hungarian at the age of eight, so his fluency in the language was very limited; in addition, he had no previous experience in *kiruv*. But Rabbi Keleti consulted with *Gedolei Yisrael*, *shlita*, including Harav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, Harav Ahron Leib Steinman, the Belzer Rebbe, and the Erlauer Rebbe, all of whom encouraged the idea of *kiruv* activities in Hungary.

"This will be the rescue of so many Jews. You cannot shirk the responsibility!" Rav Elyashiv declared.

The *Gedolim* advised Rabbi Keleti to use a group of *kollel yungeleit* as his *kiruv* base, even if they didn't know the language.

"Believe me, it wasn't easy to find suitable *yungeleit* who were prepared to move to the Hungarian spiritual wilderness," he says.

Initially, Rabbi Keleti tried to find *avreichim* who spoke Hungarian. But when he couldn't find any who were suitable, he decided to accept English-speaking *avreichim*. Although these *avreichim* could not communicate easily with the Hungarian youngsters, and although Hungarians preferred hearing their native language, a foundation was established.

The program gained momentum after

Rabbi Keleti met Shlomo Noach Mandel, the representative of Albert Reichman's *kiruv* work in Eastern Europe. To prepare the ground, Rabbi Keleti made several weeklong trips to Hungary, during which he spoke with many youngsters. Finally, after a great deal of sweat and toil, accommodation was found for the young *frum* families and Rabbi Keleti informed the *Gedolim* of his intention to begin *kiruv* activities in Budapest.

"The *Gedolim* expressed their enthusiasm, and the Belzer Rebbe even gave me an envelope containing \$10,000 to help found the *kollel*," Rabbi Keleti recalls.

The Belzer Rebbe, *shlita*, told him that many Hungarian Holocaust survivors became Belzer chassidim because the *chassidus* focuses on a close *kesher* with their Rebbe, just as in pre-War Hungarian *kehillos*.

Rabbi Keleti also received letters of support from Harav Shmuel Wosner, the Makava Rebbe, the Mattersdorfer Rav, Harav Shmuel Auerbach, and Harav Tuvia Weiss, as well as from the previous Rav of the Orthodox *kehillah* in Budapest, Harav Aharon Gedalya Hoffman, *zt"l*, who was recently *niftar*.

Now, two and a half years after the launch of Lativ (L'maan Techiyas Yahadut B'Hungaria, "For the Revival of Judaism in Hungary"), Rabbi Keleti has found two Hungarian-speaking *avreichim* who are exceptionally active in the *kehillah* and in helping bring Jewish youngsters back to their heritage.

Although Rabbi Keleti is still based in Eretz Yisrael, he spends most of the year in Hungary, and every Yom Tov he is joined by his wife and youngest son, who is a *bachur*.

"I miss the Yom Tov get-togethers with our married children and grandchildren, but we understand that we are here on a *shelichus*," he says.

Rabbi Keleti initiated the printing of pamphlets in Hungarian with *halachos* and thoughts on all the upcoming Yamim Tovim, which were distributed to a large number of Hungarian students and youngsters.

Creating Emotion

Rabbi Keleti remarked that while most *kiruv* work means cultivating fertile ground, in Hungary he had to start from scratch.

"They not only don't know anything about *Yiddishkeit*, they don't even have any *regesh*, feeling, for religion," he says, "despite the fact that Hungarians are very warm and emotional people."

In order to infuse Hungarian youngsters with a love of Judaism, the young *avreichim* started by hosting them for Shabbos and Yom Tov meals.

"At the Shabbos meals with the *avreichim* and their families, the youngsters start feeling the warmth of Judaism," says Rabbi Keleti. One of the girls remarked after Yom Tov, "My whole inner life has been changed."

In addition, Lativ has taken several groups to visit the religious communities in Antwerp and London to show the kids what an established Jewish community looks like. In Antwerp, the Hungarian youngsters were hosted by Rabbi Mordechai Stauber, *menahel* of the Beis Rachel Girls' School, and Rabbi Zekil Pollack.

"Rabbi Pollack's mother, who is Hungarian, spoke to the group and broke down in tears during her speech," recalls Rabbi Keleti.

During their Shabbos in Antwerp, the group *davened* in the Belzer *beis medrash* and attended the *tisch* of Reb Leibish, the Pshevorsker Rebbe. But what influenced them most of all was the warm *hachnasas orchim* of the Antwerp *kehillah*.

"The *baalei batim* fought over having the merit of hosting the youngsters," notes Rabbi Keleti, "and the children were extremely impressed by the *ahavas Yisrael* they experienced."

After Shabbos, Rabbi Keleti overheard the girls discussing how and where to buy something. Expecting them to return with a souvenir, he was amazed to see that they had gone to buy pictures of Rabbanim!

The girls explained that they noaticed the young Antwerp children playing with cards featuring pictures of

The Mind-Changing Photograph

When the Makava Rebbe came to Budapest, Rabbi Keleti asked him to address the students. He immediately agreed, adding that since his Hungarian wasn't fluent, he would prefer that Rabbi Keleti act as translator. After the event, the Rebbe commended Rabbi Keleti, saying, "You're very good at translating."

Several months later, in Antwerp, an event was held in support of Lativ, with all the Rabbanim of Hungarian *kehillos* or those with Hungarian roots signing a *kol korei* calling for people to help the organization.

When the *kol korei* was brought to Harav Eliyahu Sternbuch, after reading the heading of that call to action, which clearly stated the geographic connection between Lativ and the rabbis who had signed, he declined, saying, "I'm not Hungarian."

However, when he browsed through the Lativ brochure, Rabbi Sternbuch caught sight of a picture of the Makava Rebbe addressing the group of Lativ youngsters, with the girls sitting behind him. On seeing this picture, Rabbi Sternbuch immediately reached out for the *kol korei* and added his signature.

Noticing Rabbi Keleti's surprise that a picture had caused him to change his mind so drastically, Rabbi Sternbuch explained: "My *mechutan*, the Makava Rebbe, never speaks to a group of women or girls, so if he broke from his tradition in order to address that group, there could be no better proof that this is really something special!"



The Makava Rebbe speaks with Rabbi Keleti and Lativ *avreichim* during his visit to Hungary.

Rabbanim, and they also wanted such cards. They were very interested in the Rabbanim and wanted to know all about them.

"A week earlier they would not have been interested in Rabbanim pictures," Rabbi Keleti observed, "but the visit aroused their *regesh*."

The successful week in Antwerp was followed by an eight-day trip to Golders Green in London, jointly organized by Lativ and the Jewish Learning Exchange, a London branch of Ohr Somayach International. In Golders Green, it was once again the host who impressed the youngsters.

Mr. Ze'ev (Willie) Stern, the Hungarian-born businessman who hosted the group on Friday night, admirably represented the integration of *Yiddishkeit* and wordly pursuits. As a successful businessman whose thoughts and ambitions are centered in Torah, *chassidus*, and *yiras Shamayim*, he exemplified all that the Lativ youngsters had learned and heard. Mr. Stern delivered *divrei Torah* in Hungarian, and

the youngsters hung on every word.

The London visit gave them a strong push. On returning to Hungary, a few of the youngsters pleaded with Rabbi Keleti to learn *Gemara* with them, one of the boys left for a yeshivah in Berlin, another went to learn in Eretz Yisrael, and a teenage girl decided to continue her studies in a *chareidi* institution in Yerushalayim.

Lativ has established many activities to attract Budapest's Jewish youngsters, hoping to educate them about *Yiddishkeit* and influence them eventually to lead Torah-true lives. Activities include a homemaking workshop for women that takes place in the home of one of the *kollel* couples, instruction in kashering a *treif* kitchen, and a learning program in which the students study one on one with the *kollel* men.

In addition, Lativ organizes community events during the Yamim Tovim, including an uplifting *simchas beis hasho'evah* during Sukkos, a Purim party and festive Purim *seudah*, and a

communal Pesach Seder attended by over fifty locals, for most of whom it is their first Pesach experience.

"Are You Really Jewish?"

Lativ is very careful to accept only members who can prove their Judaism. This is determined quite easily in Budapest, whose Jewish community archives were not destroyed by the Nazis during the Holocaust, so all the original documents proving residents' Jewish roots are available. But nothing is left of the archives of other pre-Holocaust Jewish communities in Hungary, making it much more difficult for people from those towns to prove their Jewishness, and Lativ has had to turn away those who can't provide adequate proof.

In one case, a student who wanted to join Lativ was disappointed on hearing that his grandmother had converted to Christianity in the 1930s. But Rabbi Keleti advised him to look for his grandmother's parents' documents, which showed that they were Jewish

and even used their Jewish names, something extremely rare in Hungary in those days. After receiving the necessary documents, the youngster was accepted in Lativ. He has made significant progress in his Torah studies and has become one of the group's most dynamic members.

In another case, Rabbi Keleti doubted the Jewish roots of a girl and asked her to bring him her family documents. In an ironic twist, he was extremely surprised to learn that her grandfather had been one of the leading Hungarian Rabbanim before the Holocaust!

Many Holocaust survivors who returned to Hungary after World War II were phobic about Judaism, and they hid their religion from their children. But what they thought was a carefully kept secret was common knowledge among their gentile neighbors. In one case, a Jewish girl living outside of Budapest who was uninformed about her heritage had a religious Christian friend who asked her why she didn't go to church. When the girl couldn't give a feasible reason, the friend asked her parents if she could take the girl with her to services.

"Of course not," the parents replied. "She's Jewish!"

The girl was shocked to learn about her Jewish origins from a Christian friend, and when she verified the fact with her parents, she decided to do something about it. After Lativ confirmed her Jewish roots, she started attending the group's biweekly meetings, *shiurim*, and events. She is now studying in Neve

Yerushalayim in Eretz Yisrael.

A major part of Rabbi Keleti's work is trying to find these lost Jews.

"If we don't catch them now, they will be lost forever to the Jewish nation," he says.

He knows that he can't expect all the Jewish youngsters Lativ brings in to become religious, but at least they will continue to acknowledge their Jewishness.

"The rate of intermarriage is staggeringly high in Hungary, and every day wasted means another Jewish soul lost to [Judaism]. We are in a frantic fight

to save Hungarian Jewry before the whole huge Jewish population falls victim to the silent Holocaust of intermarriage," he states.

Rabbi Keleti gives a *shiur* to Lativ students.



They Want to Hear

Rabbi Keleti says that there are many people of Jewish origin who want to listen and understand, and our job is to find them. For example, last Shavuot a secular culture center organized a series of lectures lasting until three in the morning. Although he knew none of the other speakers were going to mention anything connected with *Yiddishkeit*, Rabbi Keleti accepted an invitation to speak. On the printed schedule, his speech, on the topic of Torah leaders, was scheduled from 11 p.m. until midnight; he planned to give a *shiur* based on the introduction of the Maharal to *maseches Avos*.

Rabbi Keleti was very doubtful that participants in a secular cultural event would be interested in a Torah *shiur* at eleven o'clock at night – but when he arrived, he saw over thirty people waiting to hear his *shiur*!

As another example, he relates that when he first came to Hungary, he and his wife stayed in Mishkoltz from Erev Yom Kippur until after Sukkos. Over 100 people attended the Yom Kippur *tefillos*, for which Rabbi Keleti served as the *shaliach tzibbur*.

"I was *davening* with my back to the *mispallelim* and couldn't see what was going on, but my wife said there wasn't a dry eye in the whole shul during the *tefillos*," he says.

Their visit was the talk of the town, and Rabbi Keleti still has a newspaper clipping describing the uplifting *tefillos* and Yom Tov *seudos* during the *Yamim Nora'im* and Sukkos.

"You have renewed for us the atmosphere before the Holocaust," one of the *kehillah* members said. They asked Rabbi Keleti to stay in Mishkoltz, but he had to turn down the offer.

"I am busy collecting for the Lativ programs in Budapest and have no time to go to Mishkoltz," he told them with a sigh. "If I could stay in Hungary without having to travel around the world collecting funds, so many more Jewish youngsters could be saved."

Another aspect of his work involves

the many Israeli students studying medicine in Hungary's universities; there are about 400 in Budapest, 200 in Debrecen, and another 200 in Szeged.

"The more young couples we send to do *kiruv*, the stronger our basis will be, and the further we will be able to reach out to young people," says Rabbi Keleti. "Once a youngster starts to understand *Gemara* properly, we send him to a yeshivah outside Hungary since there aren't enough boys there to start a yeshivah. What we need is a strong group of men or boys in order to be able to build a full-fledged local yeshivah."

Admired by All

In Budapest, Lativ staff have joined the small Orthodox *kehillah* that numbers only fifty Jews. The *kehillah* has its own Rav and *shochet*, who *shechts* on a steady basis for the *kehillah*. The community also runs a senior citizens' home and a hospital. Rabbi Keleti and his *avreichim daven* in the 130-year-old Bikur Cholim shul, where he is the unofficial Rav. Although Budapest is famed for the historic split between the Orthodox community and the Neologists (Reform), Rabbi Keleti says this was in the past.



"Nowadays, most Jews aren't affiliated with any community," he explains, "and we get on very well with the Neologists."

Rabbi Keleti once heard a Neologist ask the group's leader, Mr. Zoltai, why he spent so much time with the Orthodox rabbi. Zoltai replied, "We don't save any Jews, nor do any of our activities save any Jews. Only people like him save other Jews!"

On another occasion, Rabbi Keleti needed help securing a visa for one of his *avreichim*. He approached Zoltai, who immediately called his legal adviser.

"This is a real rabbi," Zoltai told the legal adviser, "so make sure he gets the best possible service."

Within a few days, the problem was resolved.

"Whenever I enter his office, even if he is in the middle of an important meeting, Mr. Zoltai runs over to me and asks me what I want. Only when I tell him that the issue can wait does he return to his meeting," says Rabbi Keleti.

And how do the local gentiles relate to the Jewish presence in Budapest?

"There are isolated incidents of anti-

Semitism on the political front, and since the rise of a neo-Nazi group it is true that anti-Semitic incidents have increased. But I have never personally encountered any racism," says Rabbi Keleti.

Rabbi Keleti does not hide his Jewishness; he walks proudly in Budapest's streets and squares in his rabbinic garb, and if there is any reaction from the local gentiles, it is, at least overtly, that of respect and admiration.


"I can't hide my long beard, and I have no intention of walking in the town's squares without my hat and long jacket. Yet wherever I go, the locals make way for me and stand up in my honor," says Rabbi Keleti, adding that he is also warmly welcomed in government offices, where he receives VIP treatment.

"I have never been confronted with hostility in government offices, and if my religion is ever mentioned, it is only in a positive context," he says.

Last year, Rabbi Keleti happened to be walking in the street when a group of anti-government protestors suddenly came toward him. The rabbi had no means of escape since they could easily have outrun him, so instead he held his head high and continued walking in their direction. When he approached the gang, they made a path for him to pass without saying a word.

On another occasion, the rabbi was with a guest from Israel when they happened to walk past an anti-government protest. The speaker called out over the microphone, "Look, there are two Jews walking over there. If they wave to us, it means they have nothing against us..."

Rabbi Keleti immediately waved to the crowd — which cheered in response!

It appears that Rabbi Keleti's charm not only captures the local Jews bringing them back to their roots, but even the gentiles who aren't known for their love of Jews are enchanted by the rabbi. 



Simchas Purim at Lativ.