

Rabbi David Keleti was an accomplished *maggid shiur* in Israel when he discovered he had another mission. A native of Hungary and fluent in its language, he left his family behind and set off to sustain the trickle of Jews whose identities were reemerging from decades of persecution and neglect. Would he succeed? We spent a Shabbos there to find out

New Commitments in Ancient *Eger*

BY Aryeh Ehrlich, Hungary
PHOTOS Avinoam Yogav



The cannons no longer blast from atop Dobo Square.

In fact, this historic plaza has just undergone a dramatic 21st-century facelift. But as I stand here, at the foot of the ancient fort of Eger — a 500-year-old castle and monument to patriotic heroism in Hungary — I can almost hear the desperate cannon fire in our imaginations. The fortress has known regional wars, bloody battles, and passionate revolutions, although now the artillery barrels stand empty, dusty, and abandoned.

A bit like the Jewish community that once thrived here.

Eger — known as Erloi by the Jews (spelled Erlau by the Germans) — is famous for its ancient battles, but also for its hot springs and world-class wines, about which Rebbe Nachman of Breslov said that anyone who tastes Hungarian wine can never go back to the taste of other wine. There is no kosher Hungarian wine, though; during my Shabbos in Eger, I made Kiddush on American grape juice.



New Commitments in Ancient Eger

Ancient Eger, contested by the Turks and then the Habsburgs, always seemed to bounce back from calamity. In 1800, a fire broke out and consumed half the city; in 1827, another fire destroyed the city center; and four years later, hundreds of residents died in a cholera epidemic. But it never recovered from the horror of 1944, when the Jews of the city were rounded up into a brick factory, loaded into cattle cars, and shipped off to Auschwitz.

Few survived the Holocaust and even fewer found their way back to their hometown, although one prominent survivor from Eger is the Rebbe of Erloi, Rav Yochanan Sofer, who returned to the town with a handful of students and reestablished a yeshivah before moving to Eretz Yisrael in 1950.

Today, just a few dozen Jews are left — but that didn't stop Rabbi David Keleti from renting out one of the tourist hotels at the foot of the castle for a weekend of Jewish inspiration. And that's how I wound up getting dragged into a circle with Benche and his friend Binyamin Zev — a former Neolog and passionate *baal teshuvah* — as they do a little jig on a street corner to a song that emerges almost instinctively. As their voices carry through Dobo Square across from the bronze-green horse statues, the biggest attraction here is the little group of Hungarian Jews who have suddenly turned into an impromptu street quartet:

*Szól a kakas már,
Majd megvirrad már,
Zöld erdőben, sík mezőben,
Sétál egy madár...
De mikor lesz az már?
"Yibaneh Hamikdash, Ir Tzion timalei,"
Akkor lesz az már.
"U'mipnei chata'einu, galinu mei'artzeinu,"
Azért nincs az már.*

I must admit, there are few situations more confounding than standing next to a group of people speaking Hungarian. The mysterious inflections and sing-song timbre of this language — along with the utterly foreign combinations of sounds — seem to hide a secret. I'm still trying to figure out the meaning of *Szól a kakas*, when Benche, a young friendly Hungarian *baal teshuvah*, enthuses, "That's our anthem. The favorite song of the Jews here."

"*Szól a Kakas*" actually goes back to Rav Yitzhak Eizik of Kaliv zy"u, who adapted it from the songs sung by shepherds in the pastures of central Europe. Jews have been singing this song for years. If you're a Hungarian Jew, then nothing can replace it, not "Afilu B'hastarah," not "V'sei'areiv Lifanecha," or even "Racheim."

The song speaks of a rooster standing in a verdant forest, where a beautiful bird is waiting for him. Why is the bird waiting? Because of our sins, we were exiled from our land. And the rooster calls to the bird: Wait, bird, wait. If G-d intends me for you, I will rejoice in freedom with you. When will that happen? When will it come? When the Beis Hamikdash is rebuilt, the city of Zion is filled.

For the few minutes of "*Szól a Kakas*," we can envision ancient Erloi. And maybe Rabbi Keleti can too.

Native Son In an old apartment building on Eötvös Street in Budapest, we're welcomed by Rabbi David Keleti, a trailblazer who had no inkling of this particular mission until

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70 YEARS EMPTY "There are 90,000 Jews in Budapest alone, yet most of them don't even know what Judaism is." Rabbi Keleti is trying to create a meaningful reintroduction

he was well into his 50s. He had been a respected *maggid shiur* in Yeshivas Me'oros HaTorah in the Jerusalem suburb of Telshe Stone, and before that a longtime *Mir talmid* and disciple of Rav Nachum Partzovitz ztz"l. He was never one of those charismatic *kiruv* personalities, but he had two essential ingredients going for him: a rare degree of Torah scholarship, and a fluent command of Hungarian.

Rabbi Keleti, who's invested the last eight years of his life into Hungarian Jewry, was born in the Debrecen region of Hungary and made aliyah with his parents when he was just seven. But the sensitivity of a child of Hungarian Holocaust survivors — refugees who witnessed the destruction of their communities — always stayed with him. Growing up, Rabbi Keleti heard from his mother how the gentile neighbors clapped as they watched the Jews of her town leave their house keys on a table prior to boarding the trains to Auschwitz.

Today there are approximately 90,000 Jews in Budapest, Hungary's capital and largest city. But it was an assimilationist Neolog stronghold a hundred years before the Holocaust, and virtually all the observant Jews who survived fled before the Communist takeover in 1956. Thus, most of the Jews remaining in Hungary today have been cut off from any trace of Judaism for three generations, and in many cases much longer — many don't even know they're Jewish, or if they do, what it means.

Such is the community to which Rabbi Keleti first decided to bring Torah in 2007. His original plan was to travel to Budapest for one week a month to give *shiurim*, but he was encouraged by Rav Elyashiv and *yblcht"u* Rav Aharon Leib Steinman to open a proper *kollel*. Eventually the six *yungeleit* who joined him all returned to Israel because there were no suitable schools for their children in Budapest, and Rabbi Keleti found himself alone. But he persevered, and managed to create a homegrown *kollel* and a Torah-observant *kehillah*. About 150 students became regular participants in his ongoing *shiurim*, and of those young people, 13 couples married. Nine





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of those newlyweds became the *kollel* nucleus, doing a rigorous learning program and being primed for leadership of the next generation. Once in two weeks Rabbi Keleti travels back to Jerusalem to spend Shabbos with his wife (whose Israeli paycheck is the family’s only source of regular income) and to see his children and grandchildren.

I was intrigued by Rabbi Keleti’s dedication, and so were my traveling companions Rav Yitzchak Yechiel Ehrenfeld, *rosh yeshivas* Beis Shmuel in Jerusalem; and the cream of Arachim lecturers Rabbi Tzvi Inbal, Rabbi Aharon Levy, and Rabbi Chaim Idan — all invited by Rabbi Keleti to conduct a seminar on Judaism. After meeting up in Budapest, we were soon on our way to the town of Eger, 80 miles away. As we made our way up the Danube, we passed by towns whose names ring familiar — Miskolc, Debrecen, and others.

What happened to this world? On the way to Eger, Mrs. Erica Libai, a Budapest native and guide in the Budapest Jewish Museum who is today an Orthodox wife and mother, shares her own story as an answer.

After years in an Israeli yeshivah, native son Rabbi Yehoshua Doman was persuaded to come back to teach Torah to his uninitiated brothers

“We Hungarian Jews don’t know much about our family roots because of Communist rule. But in the 1990s, when the Masores Avos Jewish school opened, my parents felt enough of a Jewish conscience to send me there.”

Even under the Communists, Budapest retained a minimal religious infrastructure that allowed for the state-controlled functioning of shuls and other basic religious amenities, and in 1989, with the dissolution of Communism in Hungary, the Skulener Rebbe pushed for the establishment of an educational network that would expose Hungarian Jewish children to Torah and mitzvos.

Although not religious at the time, Libai eventually went on to study in Israel at the Tel Aviv School of Design, and then moved to Italy, where she became closer to her Jewish heritage.

The Jewish Museum belongs to the non-Orthodox Jewish Neolog community, which controls most of the Jewish institutions, including the cemeteries. “In my estimation, there are about 600 Jewish cemeteries in Hungary. Wherever you go, you’ll find a small Jewish cemetery or a gravesite.”

She says that Jews knew good periods in their relations with the Austro-Hungarian emperors. “Josef II granted rights to the Jews who, under the influence of the Haskalah, wanted to be like Hungarians, and from there, the Neolog community evolved. To this day, despite the Holocaust, Hungarian Jews long to feel like full-fledged Hungarians.”

But according to Libai, it’s not so easy to be a Jew or a Hungarian today. The radical right-wing Jobbik party and its virulent anti-Jewish

platform garnered more than 20 percent support in the last elections; the economy is failing and the currency is weak. “Today, everyone is challenged,” Libai admits. “There’s a Hungarian maxim that ‘truth died together with King Matthias Corvinus’ — five hundred years ago.”

No One Knew Our first stop in Eger, on the way to the Corona Hotel, was a natural spring. Rabbi Keleti had to *toivel* some pots he had picked up in the nearby shopping center. In modern-day Hungary that’s not something to be taken for granted. Nor is an entire *kosher l’mehadrin* Shabbos for a hundred Jews who’ve come here to strengthen their spiritual identity. For this Shabbos, Rebbetzin Keleti — who lives in Israel while her husband is here — has brought in three huge suitcases with 130 pounds of food. How, I ask, did she manage that? “Good Jews helped me at Ben-Gurion,” she says, “and righteous gentiles helped me in Budapest.”

In the evening, we’ll be joined by Rabbi Shmuel Binyamin Schiffer, a patron of Vienna’s chareidi community who traveled from Austria by car with his son-in-law Rabbi Tzvi Hochhauser, the *rosh kollel* for *avreichim metzuyanim* in Vienna. For Rabbi Schiffer, the effort is worthwhile: He was born in Hungary during the war, and can’t get over the sight of young Hungarian Jews taking steps back toward their heritage.

“I could have been just like them,” he whispers to me on Friday night, as we walk back to our hotel rooms. “I was born here too, but HaKadosh Baruch Hu performed a miracle for me and I was spared.”

It’s here that I meet Binyamin Zev, an outgoing, energetic, and highly intelligent young man who is also the *chazzan* for the large Neolog community in Budapest — which he’s now abandoned in favor of a fully Torah-observant life. (Neolog Jews broke off from traditional Judaism in the 19th century, and its community is similar to the Conservative movement in the US.) Today Binyamin Zev, a doctoral student in physics and fluent in seven languages, wears a black hat and says as soon as he gets his PhD, he’s “off to full-day *kollel*.”

Binyamin Zev, 28, says Judaism was something he wasn’t allowed to discuss when he was growing up. His parents acknowledged Yom Kippur and the first Seder night, but no one else was allowed to know their secret.

“Once when I was little, the teacher asked me what religion I belonged to. I said to her, ‘I’m Jewish.’ She grimaced slightly, wrinkling her nose. When I told my parents, they were furious. ‘Why did you have to tell her?’ they admonished me. And after that, I never told my friends. No one knew I was Jewish.

“There was one good thing, though,” Binyamin Zev continues. “My grandfather was a bit religious. He passed away before I was born, and he said to my father: ‘If you have a son who wants to be religious, help him.’ And so when I started getting more interested, my father did support me.”

Binyamin Zev’s life began to turn around when he was a mathematics student at the University of Technology in Budapest. He wanted

Binyamin Zev (left) and friends enlighten Mishpacha's reporter. "They aren't all anti-Semites. Hungarians respect Jews who respect their Judaism"



to pursue some other interests as well, and discovered a *chazzanus* track at the Jewish studies college of the Neologs ("I had a fantasy to be a pop star, but this was more realistic," he says).

"I, who had always hid my identity from my friends, was nervous about their reaction, but surprisingly enough, they admired the fact that I was studying at two institutions simultaneously, and actually respected the fact that I was a Jew," he explains. "It was an important turning point in my life: I discovered that not all gentiles in Hungary hate Jews. I think that Hungarians respect Jews who respect their Judaism."

As much as he appreciated being able to give expression to Jewish culture, Binyamin Zev began to move closer to Torah Judaism and away from what he called "the heresy of the Neologs." But there was still an internal struggle he had to deal with. "I was a *chazzan* in the Neolog Pava Synagogue in Budapest, and had been there for five years. It was hard for me to leave. For several years, after I'd already become Orthodox, I continued to serve as the *chazzan*. This Shabbos in Eger is the first Shabbos I haven't been there since I started."

So who will be the new *chazzan*, I ask?

"They don't need one. They have someone from the opera there... they can take him."

In truth, Binyamin Zev's affinity for Torah was sparked years before, when he asked his parents if he could attend classes in the Talmud Torah at the Neolog congregation, where lessons in basic Judaism were held once a week. His two older brothers would take him to the lessons, but they themselves refused to participate.

"Today they have an interesting relationship with Judaism," Binyamin Zev says. "There is definitely a reawakening, but they already have families. The older one, Ivan, is married to a non-Jewish woman. The second, Bolaj, is married to a Jewess who would like to move closer toward religion, but is afraid to make the change, afraid of what people will say. Ivan, though — he's not afraid to say he's Jewish,

despite his wife. His sons attend a Christian school and everyone knows that their father is a Jew. When I speak to him about his wife, he says that only religious people think inter-marriage is a problem. It will take him time to understand. His wife goes to church. I daven that he should do *teshuvah*. Who knows? We've seen many miracles already."

Start with Alef-Beis When Rabbi Keleti's father was liberated from Auschwitz, he made his way back to Hungary, where he met and married his murdered wife's younger sister — also a survivor who had been sent from Auschwitz to work in a munitions factory. Together, they did what hundreds of other survivors did — they tried to rebuild their lives under the Communist regime.

"I went to a non-Jewish school in Debrecen," Rabbi Keleti recalls. "But every Sunday, I attended a Jewish study class organized by the Jewish community. This way, when I came to Israel, at least I knew how to daven a little."

He was seven when he came to Eretz Yisrael with his parents. He was sent to chareidi schools and integrated into the yeshivah world. Still, those first seven years left him with a fluency in Hungarian that — little did he imagine — would serve him well decades later.

When Rabbi Keleti began this new stage in his life eight years ago, he would travel to Hungary once a month in order to deliver *shiurim* and to locate Jews.

"Then my little congregation asked me to stay," he recalls. "I went to Rav Elyashiv *ztz"l*, and asked him if I should leave my Torah position in Israel to move to Hungary. His response was unequivocal: 'This is a *hatzalah* for Klal Yisrael,' he said. Then, when I turned to leave, he

repeated the answer several times over again."

After that, and following an additional endorsement from Rav Steinman, the Belzer Rebbe donated the first \$10,000 so he could get started. "The Rebbe said to me, 'I know that \$10,000 won't be enough even to wash *netilas yadayim*, but it will be a start.' He suggested that I find Jews of Hungarian descent around the world to fund my work, and that's what I do. But in all honesty, I'm still waiting for a miracle, a breakthrough."

Although it's 70 years later, Rabbi Keleti says that as far as Jewish awareness goes, the situation in Hungary has only deteriorated since 1945.

"There are 90,000 Jews in Budapest alone, yet most of them don't even know what Judaism is, or if they are a part of it," he says, noting people like Csanád Szegedi, a former member of the radical nationalist Jobbik party and one-time rabid anti-Semite, who recently discovered he is a Jew and has begun to move closer to his lost heritage. "We have to teach most of our students *alef-beis*. And I always ask them to bring copies of their grandmothers' birth certificates. If the paper says 'IZR' then there's a strong chance that the person is a Jew. But verification isn't simple."

Rabbi Keleti, one of several pioneers in this Jewish desert, says there is no room for *machlokes* in a place where united energy is vital. His Lativ organization — an acronym for *L'Maan Techiyah Yehudit B'Hungariah* — works in cooperation with Chabad *shluchim* Rabbi Baruch Oberlander, Rabbi Shlomo Koves, and Rabbi Shmuel Raskin, directing people from his *kehillah* to both the Orthodox community school and the Chabad school for their children's education.

"Each of us has his own *derech*, but there is

more than enough work here for anyone who wants to take it on," says Rabbi Keleti.

His nerve center is on the first floor of an office building in Pest. He got the suite for free from Ron Starkman, a former Israeli entrepreneur who moved to Hungary and is CEO of Budapest's Plaza Center. "He never had a religious education, but he has a warm Jewish heart," Rabbi Keleti relates. "He found us, and said it would be a privilege for him to have people learning Torah on his property."

Here there are daily Torah *shiurim*, a *kollel* for young men, and communal Shabbos meals, as well as other events marking holidays and special times on the Jewish calendar. And Rabbi Keleti makes sure to organize special trips for his congregation to other European cities with large Jewish communities, so they can see what vibrant Jewish life really looks like.

Rabbi Yehoshua Doman is one person who can relate to the phenomenon, even though he seems like a typical *litvishe kollel avreich*, but for the Hungarian accent that gives away a different story. He was born here, and grew up with no particular Jewish awareness, until he discovered his Judaism and started learning on the fast track — nine years in Yeshivas Givat Shaul in Jerusalem. But although he started out late, Reb Yehoshua believed in going back to his roots all the way: he davens Nusach Ashkenaz with a traditional Hungarian pronunciation, like the students of the Chasam Sofer. After marrying and raising his children in Eretz Yisrael, he was persuaded by Rabbi Keleti to come back to Budapest to teach Torah to his brethren.

Rabbi Keleti says he's proud to be one of those pioneers who's not ashamed to go out on the streets of Budapest with his beard, *peyos*, black hat, and rabbinic frock. "Every now and then a passerby has hissed, 'Get out of our country, dirty Jew.' But I pay no attention and continue walking. In general, I've found that people treat a rabbinic figure with respect."

Song for a New Week For Shalosh Seudos, a hundred Hungarian Jews in various stages of return join together in the dining room of the Corona Hotel. Outside it's cold and already dark, but inside there's the light of a weekend of lectures, discussions, *zemiros* and inspiration — all sorts of things that make a person reassess how he thinks. It's not easy to remove the layers that have accumulated over generations of estrangement, but after Havdalah, when a local Jewish choir from Budapest takes the stage, it all begins to converge with a slow, complex, yet very familiar song:

*Szól a kakas már,
De mikor lesz az már?
De mikor lesz az már?
"Yibaneh Hamikdash, Ir Tzion timalei,"
Akkor lesz az már.
"Yibaneh Hamikdash, Ir Tzion timalei,"
Akkor lesz az már.*

For Rabbi Keleti, this is no swan song. It's just a beginning. ●