



# *Welcome to Budapest*



הסוכנות היהודית לארץ ישראל  
Jewish Agency for Israel

# The Jewish Agency for Israel in Eastern Europe

## Rebuilding Jewish Life Through Jewish Education and Cultural Identity



Since the fall of the communist regimes at the end of the 1980's there has been a rebirth of Jewish life in Eastern Europe. Inevitably these communities are a pale shadow of the many millions of Jews who lived in the region before the Holocaust. The Nazis exterminated more than 4 million Jews from Poland and Hungary alone and hundreds of thousands of Jewish survivors immigrated to Israel.

Today it is difficult to know the exact number of Jews in these countries. The Nazi occupation followed by more than four decades of communist oppression persuaded the Jews who remained to assimilate, or maintain a very low profile. The Jewish Agency estimates that there may be as many as 250,000 Jews in the region with by far the largest remaining number of Jews in Hungary where there is a community of at least 80,000 but maybe as many as 150,000. Some 90% of Hungary's Jews live in the capital Budapest.

Elsewhere in the region there are smaller Jewish communities in: Poland (between 10,000-60,000), Romania (12,000) and Bulgaria (4,000-6000).

At least one third of the Jewish people who remain in the region are children and young adults and their future identity quite literally hangs in the balance. They are the children of assimilated parents and have little or no knowledge of the richness of Jewish history and culture. If they are not brought into Jewish education and cultural frameworks and instilled with a Jewish identity they will be lost to the Jewish people forever.

The Jewish Agency has in recent years been successfully confronting this challenge by using Israel as the source and inspiration around which Jewish identity can be nurtured. Activities include:

- Outreach to non-affiliated Jewish youngsters.
- Building supportive partnerships with the new local community leaderships.
- Increasing the teaching of Hebrew and Jewish literacy at all levels.
- Intensifying Israel-centered activities as a way of strengthening Jewish identity.
- Introducing long- and short-term Israel experience programs (MASA and Birthright Israel) and reaching a large number of participants.

The Jewish Agency is active in Poland where there are two emissaries in Warsaw, Hebrew language classes (ulpanim), distance learning programs, youth activities and training programs, and 85 students have participated in Birthright trips to Israel. Bulgaria and Romania each have one emissary with youth movement programs, counselor training and participation in Birthright trips.

## Hungarian Jewry

Before World War II more than a million Jews lived in Hungary. Some 600,000 Jews comprising almost the entire provincial Jewish population of Hungary perished in the Holocaust in the closing months of World War II, but much of the Budapest Jewish community survived. During and after the 1956 uprisings against the Soviet Union tens of thousands of Jews emigrated, but even in the darkest days of Communism Budapest Jewry managed to maintain a vibrant community life.

There has been a major revival of Jewish life in Hungary since the fall of communism in 1989. Today Hungary, a land-locked country of 10 million in the very heart of Europe, is also a member of the European Union. Assimilation is high and for this reason estimates of the number of Jews in the country ranges from 80,000 to 150,000 with 90% of the Jewish population in Budapest. There are 25 active synagogues in Hungary and three Jewish Day schools as well as youth movements, student organizations, sports associations and much more.



As most young Jews throughout the region have little or no Jewish identity, assimilation rather than historic anti-Semitism is now the major threat to Jewish survival.

To counter this trend, Jewish Agency activities seek to strengthen Jewish identity and reach out to unaffiliated young Jews by stressing the centrality of Israel. Seventeen ulpanim for Hebrew language studies are held throughout Hungary as well as youth movement activities, counselor training, special events for festivals, student leadership seminars, training for Jewish educators and publication of a monthly newspaper. Jewish students participate in birthright israel visits to Israel and the March of the Living to Poland. A Jewish Agency emissary is based in Hungary to oversee these programs and activities throughout Eastern Europe, while several other emissaries also work in Hungary.

The Jewish Agency hopes to reach out to more than 20,000 unaffiliated Jewish youngsters in Hungary in the coming few years and strengthen their Jewish identity through its aforementioned programs.

## Jewish Life in Budapest

About 90% of Hungary's Jewish community lives in the capital Budapest, a majestic city and one of the former imperial centers of the Austro-Hungarian Empire on the picturesque banks of the River Danube.

The annihilation of the Budapest Jewish community by the Nazis only began in the last year of the war and the Germans and their Hungarian allies were unable to complete the task, enabling much of the city's Jews to survive. Under communism a relatively liberal attitude towards Jewish life prevailed and a rabbinical seminary even remained operational in Budapest. In recent years Budapest has become a major tourist attraction for western visitors and with accession to the European Union the economy is beginning to boom, although average salaries are still only \$500 per month.

With assimilation high some estimate that there may be as many 135,000 Jews in the city although only about half that number are active in the community or Jewish organizations. Jewish life has flourished since the fall of communism and today Budapest has 25 active synagogues, three day schools with about 1,000 students, five kindergartens, a University for Jewish Studies, student organizations, youth movements, a community center, a Maccabi sports club and much more.

## Jewish Agency Activities in Budapest

The Jewish Agency's operations for all of Eastern Europe are headquartered in Budapest where the region's chief emissary resides. Several other emissaries oversee the growing number of activities in Budapest, which include:

- Ulpanim for teaching Hebrew.
- Youth movement activities and counselor training.
- birthright israel trips– over 400 students have participated to date
- Participation in the March of the Living
- Events for Jewish festivals with a special emphasis on Independence Day
- The Chi"l program in Jewish schools in partnership with Israel's Ministry of Education.
- Post birthright israel seminars.
- Leadership and Jewish identity seminars
- Training for Jewish educators and Hebrew teachers in Hungary and Israel.
- One year training in Israel for a senior educator.
- One month in-house training in the city's Jewish schools for an Israeli educator.
- Establishment of a Youth Center for youth and student movements.

## Partnering with purpose, all over the world.

At the Jewish Agency, we believe that Israel stands at the heart of the Jewish future. That's why we're partnering in communities around the world with dual purpose: keeping the promise to every Jew who, for any reason, chooses to come home to Israel; and putting Israel into the lives of the next generation. Inspiring them to lead our people into the future. It's why we're partnering the Jewish world with the people of Israel to create an Israel of equal opportunity. A place where risk is transformed into possibility for every young person and every community. Because no matter where we live in the world, we are all part of this story. The Jewish Agency is a global partnership that starts with you.