

Somehow
I am
Different

NARRATIVES
OF SEARCHING AND BELONGING
IN JEWISH BUDAPEST

ALYSSA PETERSEL

INTRODUCTION

*“If we could see the miracle of a single flower clearly,
our whole life would change.” – Buddha*

“WHY ARE YOU HERE?” MY HUNGARIAN PEERS ASKED.

Two years ago, I ventured to Budapest for my interviewees to help me find the answer to their very question. Why are we here? How do we come to find meaning and purpose that drives us?

In 1944, the Holocaust began for Hungary. Prior to 1944, despite mounting anti-Semitism politically and socially, Hungary was immune to the darkest depths of the Holocaust due to its strong alliance with Nazi Germany. Following suspicion of betrayal, Germany invaded Hungary in March 1944. By May 8, 1945, The Nazi Party and its Hungarian accomplices had murdered nearly 500,000 Jews and other minorities in forced labor and concentration camps.

For the few survivors, their return home to Hungary was deeply challenging. In contrast to their high hopes, they arrived to discover their property and possessions were stolen; their friends, families and acquaintances either abandoned them or were killed; and their country, the only place they knew to be home, deemed them as less human than their non-Jewish peers and equals.

Consequently, a majority of Hungarian Jews swore off their Judaism. They yearned to protect their family from a feared repetition of the ominous past. For those that maintained their Judaism, they kept their faith a secret, especially during the Hungarian Communist Era. Accordingly, children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors with Jewish roots were left not only without faith, but also without an awareness that faith was once prominently woven into their families' identity.

Not until this generation – *my* generation – has Judaism again become a topic of conversation.

Upon the fall of the Hungarian Communist Regime in 1989, religious doors flew open. Young Hungarians opened community centers and schools, launched exploratory programs and initiated pub-crawls and spirituality hunts. The drive to define and connect with spirituality flourished throughout the city.

In March 2013, I benefited from the privilege of participating in a Jewish service trip to Budapest, Hungary organized by two Northwestern students and supported by the Fiedler Hillel on Northwestern University's campus. The unique opportunity to interact with young Jewish Budapest face-to-face told me a story I would not have encountered elsewhere.

Today, Hungarian young adults discover their religious roots in a host of unexpected places. A grandmother on her deathbed may confess her Juda-

ZSUZSANNA FRITZ



Photograph by Alyssa Petersel – Zsuzsanna Fritz

*“Everybody around me was Jewish: my grandparents,
my parents, friends, relatives, everybody...
but I had no idea.”*

THE HIGH-PITCHED WAIL OF MY ALARM jolted me awake. Rolling onto my back, I peered at the ceiling to find a smooth white coat of paint that I did not recognize. I sat up and looked across the room to find my pocket-sized purple alarm clock, the same clock that had made it through a variety of week and month-long trips, stuffed into the side pouch of my oversized tattered backpack. I sighed a long, meditated exhale. I was not at home. I was in Budapest, in my new apartment, in my new bed, awaiting my new shower. Reality rushed through me – my alarm rang at precisely 8:32am. I had an interview downtown in one hour.

I tossed the sheets to the side and leapt into the bathroom. I pulled back the shower curtain to find my shower had only a hand-held spout. For the next eight months, my thick, brown hair would win the fight against the shower-head to retain most of its shampoo and conditioner.

Nearly fifteen minutes later, I peered into the only floor-length mirror in the apartment. Tilting my head to the left, I took a deep breath and gathered my pack of equipment: my miniature recorder, an iPad to hold the recordings, my cell phone to direct me to where I needed to go, my wallet to purchase my first latte, my journal containing quotes of encouragement, and a pen for everything else.

I stepped one foot after the other out the kitchen door. Natural light shined through the open ceiling and plants overflowed their pots lining the perimeter