

Jews in Hungary — cont'd from preceding page

Jews — the city's Jewish population approximates Detroit's or Cleveland's — has some two dozen functioning synagogues, a kosher restaurant, a kosher bakery, a kosher dairy, a challah shop, kosher butchers, a Judaica gift store, a biweekly community newspaper, a Jewish high school, Sunday morning Talmud Torah classes, youth groups, singles groups and a state-of-the-art mikvah.

In addition, there are two separate independent activist groups. The Hungarian Jewish Cultural Association, a year-old society with 1,000 members, offers a variety of cultural activities, ranging from Hebrew-language clubs to historical discussion groups. Shalom, a small collection of gadfly Jewish intellectuals who came together in 1983, issues periodic declarations on the state of Hungarian Jewry. Both groups, according to their leaders, act as catalysts to the Jewish establishment, and operate without government interference.

"People are able to lead a Jewish life without any restrictions," says Ambassador Palmer. Conditions here, he says, are far better than those he observed in the Soviet Union, when he was posted at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow earlier this decade.

Budapest, ironically, is probably the only city in the Eastern bloc with enough Jewish life to support a business dependent on death. On the outskirts of town, a Jewish craftsman makes gravestones, across from a large Jewish cemetery. The emphasis here is on the dying as well as the dead. Unlike the unused, unkempt Jewish burial grounds in other eastern European communities, cemeteries here have fresh graves that are well tended.

"Jewish life is, mamish, Gan Eden [truly the Garden of Eden] in Hungary," says Herzl Herzog, managing secretary of Budapest's Orthodox community, which includes about 10 percent of the city's Jewish population. "We have, baruch Hashem [thank God], everything." Herzog, on the side, is the only mohel in Hungary and part of Czechoslovakia. Trained 10 years ago in London on a grant from the foundation, he performs nearly one circumcision a week, for free. He brings along mezuzot, talleisim, siddurim and other requested items, sometimes driving up to 500 miles each way. The government never interferes, he says.

After years of intermittently harassing religious followers, why is Hungary rigidly enforcing its constitutional guarantees? For a better image, for trade with the West, for Jewish tourism, some say. One sign of Hungary's optimism on the last count: the first new synagogue to open in the country since the Holocaust took place in June 1986 at Siofok, a popular vacation spot on Lake Balaton, with only about 10 Jews left. One sign of Jewish acceptance of Hungary's good will: the governing boards of the foundation and the World Jewish Congress held their annual meetings in Budapest in the last two years, the first such meetings in the Eastern bloc.

Government authorities recognize religion as "one of the stabilizing factors in society," says Sarkadi-Nagy of the Church Affairs office. "There are no more enemy relations between the state and churches in Hungary," he says, adding that the new generation of Hungarian leaders, while Socialist non-believers, has "much greater tolerance" for religion.

"Basically, they have learned to live together," one Western diplomat says. The government "tries to balance (the interests of) all the churches."

A Chanukah program was broadcast in December on state television, for the first time. Christmas services were carried on television, also for the first time.

Hungary's Christian community, two-thirds Catholic, is experiencing its own small revival. Churches are full on

Sundays. Films on religious themes play in Budapest theaters. During "Golden Sunday," the national pre-Christmas shopping spree, itinerant carolers entertain on Vaci Street, the chic pedestrian mall in downtown Pest. Shop windows bear simple wreaths and multi-language holiday greetings. Stacks of scrawny evergreen branches are carried home as Christmas trees. An admittedly low-key way to celebrate, a Jewish resident observes. "Not because they're not religious, but because they're poor."

The Jewish community has led general human rights progress in Hungary, observers say, for many reasons. Its population is young (the only Eastern European land with a sizable number of Jews under the age of 50); monolithic (unlike England and France, with large immigrant groups, most of Hungary's Jews are of native stock, families of Holocaust survivors); unified (the Orthodox and Neolog-Conservatives work together amiably); fairly affluent by Hungarian standards (most of the community is middle class) and contains an inordinate number of intellectuals and journalists (the usual spurs for human rights movements).

Problems? "The major problem is financial," Gonda of the Central Board of Hungarian Jews says. "People don't have the money" to support needed activities.

Young leadership: Although the heads of several communal organizations,

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