

BEIT KNESET BNEI YISRAEL
THE STATUS QUO SYNAGOGUE IN ÚJLIPÓTVÁROS, BUDAPEST

Building the Synagogue: Its Inner and Outer Formation

The synagogue on Hegedűs Gyula Street in Budapest was built at the beginning of the 20th century in the Újlipótváros district and was one of the biggest and most popular synagogues in the Hungarian capital. Originally it was built for Orthodox Jews, and most of them attended services here.

However, due to historical conflicts within the larger Jewish community, today the Hegedűs Gyula Synagogue belongs to neither the Orthodox nor the Neolog tradition, but somewhere in between: to the Status Quo Ante community.

In the beginning of the 20th century the Orthodox community living in the north part of Lipótváros was moved from Nagy Ignác (formerly Koháry) Street to what was then Csáky Street outside the Large Circle Boulevard.

At this time in Budapest the building plans of a synagogue needed to provide security, hence the choice to keep the house of worship hidden from public view. This synagogue was built inside a large building on Csáky (now Hegedűs Gyula) Street. In 1911 the builders had to work with a very limited budget and so the synagogue was constructed within a small commercial space.

Based on the plans of Béla Vajda, a hall and a small synagogue were created on the ground floor, while on the second floor there was a balcony for women with an adjoining small room for Talmud-Torah studies.

Later the entire building was bought and in 1927, under the plans of Lipót Baumhorn, the most important synagogue architect, a structure in the courtyard of the building was built and the synagogue was expanded.

Baumhorn combined the secessionist street front with the building's neo-renaissance interior, resulting in an eclectic-style mix. The unique element of the interior is the stained glass ceiling.

From the front of the building the presence of a synagogue cannot be discerned except for little stars of David and, above the main entrance under the balcony, the inscription "Prayer House of The Pest Israelite Community".

The relative scale of the ground and first floors of the building limited visibility inside as well - the balcony was quite low. Nevertheless, Baumhorn used his characteristic capitals, adorned with small Tablets of the Law, and above them the crown referencing the Torah. Large menorahs surround the ark.

Originally the Synagogue was illuminated by the natural light of a stained glass ceiling but later the skylight was covered over, side glass bricks were installed and now the space is lit by electric fixtures.

The Hegedűs Gyula Synagogue consists of two main parts, the bigger synagogue, and a smaller one generally used in winter. Additionally, there is a clubroom on the first floor which was further expanded in the 1960's; in the former dining room adjacent to the balcony a regularly used strictly kosher kitchen was created.

The Status Quo Ante Faction

As a consequence of the differences between the Orthodox and Neolog Hungarian Jewish communities which came to a head during the Hungarian General Jewish Congress of 1868-69, a third faction emerged; that of the Status Quo Ante. A loosely-knit group of communities, it remained without a higher authority until 1928 when it was officially recognized as well.

From its inception the Status Quo Ante allowed for a wide range of Jewish practice lying somewhere in between that of the Orthodox and the Neolog communities.

The essence of the Status Quo Ante practice is to follow the traditional service while allowing for a more modern approach to dress, language, etc.

In Status Quo Ante synagogues like the Hegedűs-Csáky Bnei Yisrael Synagogue there is no organ, the bimah is situated in the middle of the sanctuary and men and women are seated in separate sections.

Religious Life, Study and Social Programs

Every day of the week there is opportunity for adult religious study in our synagogue: from Sunday to Thursday before or after the evening service, on Friday before Kabbalat Shabbat and during the Shabbat service.

For children there is Talmud study on Shabbat mornings.

The biblical and post-biblical holidays are celebrated according to tradition. A community meal is organized on Rosh Hashanah evening, Hanukah is celebrated and a Zayin Adar dinner is held in the memory of the birth and death of Moses Rabbenu. During Purim children fill our synagogue with laughter and happiness, and a traditional community Seder is held in memory of the Exodus from Egypt.

Our religious leaders prepare the children – girls for Bat Mitzvah at the age of 12, boys for Bar Mitzvah at the age of 13 – strictly according to tradition.

Club Life

The Héber Imre Generation Club organizes various programs for middle-aged and elderly members of our community. These programs include excursions to Jewish-related places both inside and outside Hungary and visiting memorial sites. There are classes offered in bridge, computer science and languages. Among our resources are a library with a wide range of books, individuals with knowledge of traditional music and others with medical expertise who can give advice to the

elderly. One of the most popular programs is a therapeutic exercise class for seniors led by a professional physiotherapist.

The Synagogue Foundation

"The 100-year-old Hegedűs Gyula Street Synagogue Foundation" was established to help provide financial and organizational support for the religious life and the future of our community. The Foundation applies for religious and governmental funding.