

The Dohany Street Synagogue, Budapest, Hungary

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The Dohany St. Synagogue is most extraordinary. It is the largest synagogue in Europe; it is the second largest in the world. It seats 3000. Its architecture is a cross between Christian, Muslim and Jewish. Its faith is neither Orthodox nor Reform; it is known as “Neolog”. During World War II its members played a significant role in rescuing thousands of Jews from certain death under the Nazis. It experienced severe damage from Allied bombing. It wasn’t until the 1990’s that the synagogue was brought back to its original shape. The list of contributors includes names you all know.

Design: The synagogue was built in the 1850’s. Looking at its unique, hybrid features, one has to wonder just how the congregation came to agree to this unorthodox design. The architect, Ludwig Forster, called it “Moorish Revival”. The decoration is based on Islamic models, like the Alhambra – all geometric designs. The twin onion domes resemble a mosque. The conventional synagogue is normally octagonal or round. This one is rectangular with a mix of gothic and Romanesque features. It features stained glass windows. The Ark contains several torahs from other synagogues that no longer exist. It even has an organ! By the way, Franz Liszt played it frequently. The Central Synagogue in Manhattan is supposed to be an exact replica of Dohany St.

So, what is “**Neolog**”? The main feature is the desire to assimilate into the local culture. Sermons were preached in Hungarian rather than Yiddish. Meat needn’t be kosher, nor did food have to be prepared according to Jewish tradition. The “Neologs” were generally more educated, affluent, and had more political clout than their orthodox brethren.

The synagogue is still orthodox in one regard. During service men sit on the main floor, while women sit in the upper gallery.

The site includes other buildings: Heroes Temple, the graveyard, the Raoul Wallenberg Memorial and the Jewish Museum, which is built on the site of the home of Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism.

World War II: A graveyard is not a common site around a synagogue. But this site has an unusual history. In 1944, toward the end of WWII, the Germans decided to construct a Jewish ghetto. The synagogue lay on the border. The ghetto was constructed so that

no one could get in or out. Nor could food be delivered or trash collected. In this record cold winter dead bodies began to pile up. Many citizens of the ghetto were shipped off to concentration camps.

Adolph Eichmann, the infamous war criminal (“I was only following orders.”) ordered the General in command of Budapest to launch a massacre of the ghetto. Raoul Wallenberg, a special Swedish envoy to Hungary, met with the General. Raoul informed him that, if he followed through with the massacre, he would see that the General would be held personally responsible and hanged as a war criminal after the war was over. The General realized that the war would soon be over, and that the Germans were losing. So he did not follow orders. The massacre was stopped thanks to Raoul Wallenberg.

Shortly after the war, the Russians assumed power. They arrested Raoul, and shipped him off to Russia where he was imprisoned. He died while in prison. Cause of death given: heart attack. He was 35.

Not only did Raoul Wallenberg stop the massacre, he facilitated the escape of thousands of other Jews by producing falsified papers to allow them to cross borders. His name, along with more than a dozen others who were instrumental in saving countless lives, is memorialized on a plaque in the Memorial Garden.

Another hero memorialized there is Sir Nicholas Winston. He organized the “Kindertransport” that saved 644 children, mostly Jews, shipping by train from Hungary to safe territory in the early days of WWII. In the 1980’s a British TV program invited Winston to attend a “Biographical” shoot. The MC asked the audience, “All those who owe their lives to Sir Winston, please stand up.” The whole audience of over 100 stood. Talk about a tear-jerker.

If you look at the gravestones, you will see that most of them have something in common: the date of death is 1944-45. Many of them died during the short life, and cold winter, of the ghetto.

Also in the garden are other impressive memorials:

A stainless steel weeping willow on which thousands of stainless leaves hang, each one with the name and tattoo number of a person who died during the war.



Allied bombing severely damaged Dohany St. It wasn't until the 1990's that adequate funding enabled reconstruction to begin. Estee Lauder contributed \$5 million. Hollywood star Tony Curtis, a Hungarian Jew, was another major contributor.

The Jewish population of Budapest took a real hit over WWII. In 1944 it exceeded 400,000. In 1948 it had diminished to less than 150,000. Today Dohany St. has less than 200 congregant families.

I have to thank our guide, Diva(?), for a most interesting, fact-filled and inspiring tour of this amazing place of worship. If you ever get to Budapest, put Dohany St. Synagogue on your "Don't Miss" list.

A la prochaine,

Chuck & Anzie

For more photos open link below:

<https://photos.app.goo.gl/po6kzPRquFPSVL228>