

In Response to Kehillah's Advocacy, Hungarian Government, EU Join to Fund Preservation of Liska Shul in Hungary

MECHON BAIS LISKA

One would imagine that after 70-plus years into the post-Holocaust era, there would be little left to restore, or preserve, of Jewish remains in Europe. However, that is not the case. A project that has been in the process for several years is about to be completed. The last remaining wall of the shul in Liska, Hungary, was preserved and reinforced, complemented by the construction of a corresponding wall on the site where the entrance stood, also delineating the exact footprint of the original shul.

Nestled in the picturesque Tokay wine region of Hungary is a small town called Liska (Olaszliszka), which barely merits a mention on the current Hungarian map, but looms large when the history of chassidic life in Hungary is studied.

Liska was a focal point where *Chassidus* was disseminated by Harav Tzvi Hersh of Liska, *zy"u*, in the 100 years preceding World War II. As was customary in pre-war Europe, most towns that boasted a chassidic Rebbe had a shul under the auspices of the *kehillah* and a *beis medrash* where the Rebbe traditionally *davened*. What is unique about this particular shul in Liska is that it was personally built by Harav Tzvi Hersh for the *kehillah* in the last years of his life and was successively graced by multiple generations of Liska Rebbes.

Unfortunately, the shul ceased to be utilized when Hungarian Jews were deported in June 1944 until the end of the war, when Jews actually returned to Liska. Then it again functioned as somewhat of a *kehillah* until after 1956, when the majority of Hungarian Jews emigrated. This chapter lasted until the mid-1960s, when Reb Oizer Dov Roth wrote to the previous Liska Rebbe, Harav Yoizef Friedlander, *zy"u*, that due to his declining health he was leaving Liska and moving into an old age home in Budapest, regretfully informing him that he would be unable to maintain the shul.

Sadly, those years were when communist control was at its peak and, due to a combination of reasons, including local hoodlums and government indifference, the shul was systematically destroyed. By the late 1970s, only the "*mizrach vant*" was left standing, where it remained in its sad state.

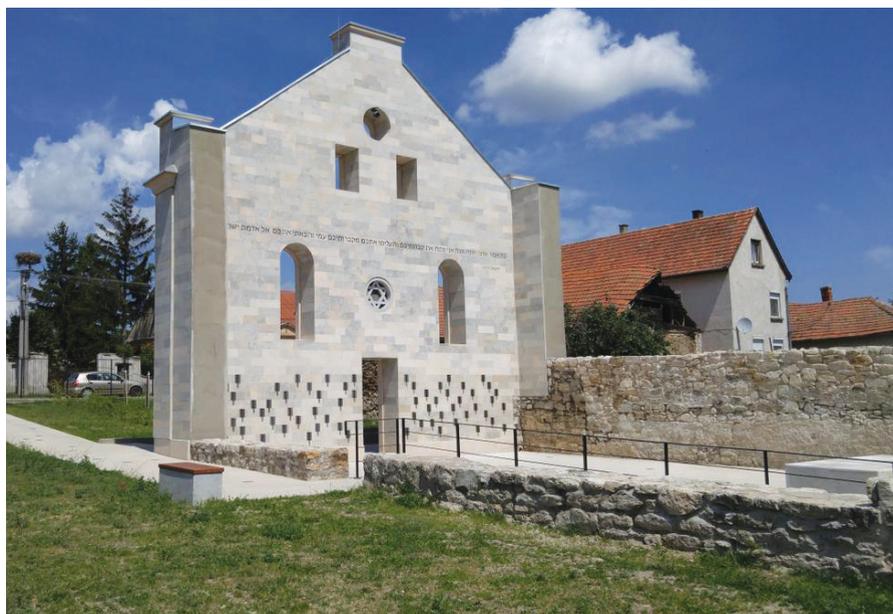
Fast forward to 2012. That



The original shul in Liska.



Footprint and last remaining wall of the original shul in Liska in its restored state.



The interior footprint of the shul, facing the newly constructed entrance wall.

was the year that the Wallenberg Commission, established by Mr. Ezra Friedlander, CEO of The Friedlander Group and son of the Liska Rebbe, *shlita*, spearheaded an effort to commemorate the heroism of Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg, who was credited with directly and indirectly saving 100,000 Hungarian Jewish lives in the waning months of World War II.

The memorial project culminated when the United States Congress posthumously awarded Wallenberg with the Congressional Gold Medal. During the Wallenberg project, Mr. Friedlander interacted with the Hungarian Embassy's congressional liaison, Ms. Anna Stumpf Smith-Lacey, and raised the issue of the status of the shul in Liska and stressed the importance of preserving it.

"The sad state of the shul in Liska was always on my mind. But my father, the Liska Rebbe, adamantly instructed me not to engage in a project that would require Jewish communal funds for the preservation of the shul in Liska, holding the opinion that this was the responsibility of the Hungarian government as the shul was an officially recognized *kehillah*, and expressed his displeasure about the vast sums of communal monies that is spent on acquiring or restoring communal properties in Hungary that remain unused," explained Mr. Friedlander.

In Hungary, Orthodoxy enjoyed official status when it broke away from reform (*Neolog*), a chapter of history in which Rav Tzvi Hersh of Liska played a dominant role.

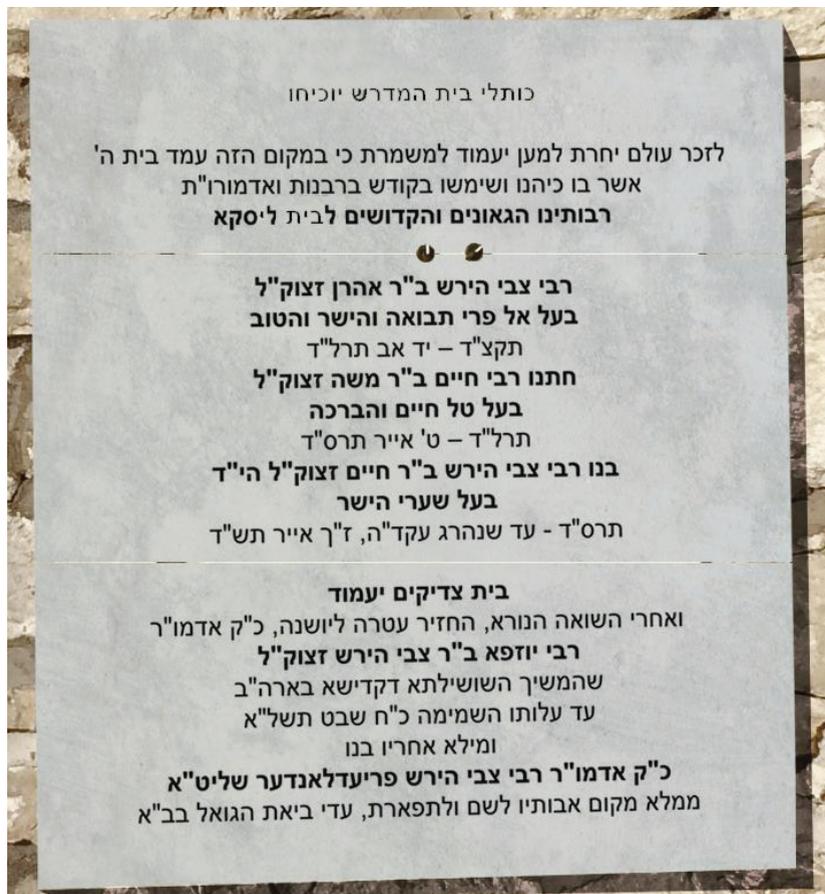
Eventually, a funding opportunity to preserve the shul was proposed as a joint venture by the Hungarian Government and the European Union to mark the 70th anniversary of the deportation of Hungarian Jewry to Auschwitz, with a mission of preserving Jewish heritage sites across Hungary.

During the planning process, "we raised concerns regarding overseeing such a sensitive project from afar," explained Mr. Friedlander. In response, the Hungarian consul general in New York, Mr. Karoly Dan, visited the current Liska Rebbe, offering his assistance and suggesting to have Chabad in Hungary (which is governmentally recognized as a *kehillah*) and not the Neolog (reform) oversee the preservation project.

Indeed, the restoration and



The Liska Rebbe (2nd L) at the site of the last remaining wall of the shul in Liska in a state of disrepair. The Rebbe's brother, the Hivnover Rebbe is gesturing to the ruins. The Liska Rebbe's son, Mr. Ezra Friedlander, is standing on the right.



Commemorative plaque listing the various Liska Rebbes who served in Liska.

preservation of the shul in Liska was executed with commitment and perfection by Rabbi Slomo Koves of Chabad on behalf of the Liska *kehillah*, thus immortalizing this revered name in chassidic culture, regarded as one of the most prominent Hungarian chassidic courts.

"Indeed, I would like to express my *hakaras hatov* to Rabbi Slomo Koves for representing the interest of the Liska *kehillah* here in the

United States, as well as descendants of the various Liska Rebbes, as well as countless families worldwide who trace their roots and heritage to Liska," concluded Mr. Friedlander.

Mr. Friedlander also expressed his appreciation on behalf of the Liska chassidic community to Ms. Anna Stumpf Smith-Lacey for initiating the process that led to the eventual restoration of the shul.

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