

**A Draft Summary of the History and International Character of
the Hungarian Bahá'í Community**

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of the Bahá'í Community of Hungary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Bahá'í Faith is a new independent revealed religion founded in Iran in 1844, with its own Holy Books, vision of God and positive moral teachings. Its Founder is Bahá'u'lláh according to the teachings of Whom the time has come for the collective coming of age of humankind, thus, based on the previous Founders of Religions, God has now sent a teacher Whose religion puts unity - the unity of mankind, of the Earth and of the religions in its focus.

There is no clergy in the Bahá'í Faith. Communities are led by nine member elected bodies on the local, national and international level.

The framework for community life is set by the Nineteen Day Feast (the Bahá'í Faith has its own calendar with nineteen 19 day months) and the nine Holy Days.

Daily prayer, reading of the Holy Writings, the annual Fast and service to humanity on the level of society are all organic parts of the believers' life. Marriage and family are considered the foundations of society. The importance of work is reflected in the fact that Bahá'u'lláh has elevated it to the rank of worship.

According to the precepts of the Bahá'í Faith, the believers obey the laws of the country where they reside.

As, according to our guidance, the Faith is a gift of God to mankind, the community does not request support from the State for pursuing its religious activities. The received 1% of personal income tax [*a unique feature of the Hungarian tax system – taxpayers have the right of donating 1% of the personal income tax they pay to any registered church community – the translator*] is used for social and economic development projects and charity purposes.

The Bahá'í Faith has been present in Hungary since 1913. This was the year when 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of the Founder of our Faith, Bahá'u'lláh, visited Hungary. Mr. Arminius Vámbéry became a Bahá'í after meeting Him; he is considered the first Bahá'í believer.

More sustained religious activities commenced in the second half of the 1920's when Bahá'ís, mostly American believers arrived to Budapest to teach the Faith. Due to their language proficiency, they primarily conducted their activities among intellectuals in the capital. The members of the first community formed in the 1930's were Jews, almost without exception. Community life began, they held public talks, printed a book, etc. As of 1937, the group operated under police surveillance, under ever more stringent conditions. By 1939, in spite of this, the number of believers became sufficient for establishing the local level leading body of the Bahá'í Faith, the Local Spiritual Assembly of Budapest. Unfortunately, embracing the Bahá'í Faith did not save the believers from deportation and from the concentration camps.

After the war the survivors restarted community life and the Local Spiritual Assembly of Budapest was once again elected in 1948. The community was banned [*by the Communist Police – the translator*] at the end of 1950. From this time onwards, the believers could only practice their religion on an individual level. Most of them left Hungary in 1956.

The new beginning occurred under very difficult conditions once again. Only two believers remained of the community of old, and due to the well-known conditions, teaching of the Bahá'í Faith was very difficult. It was first supported by Hungarian believers returning from the West then by Western Bahá'ís, mostly in the 1970's and 1980's.

The Local Spiritual Assembly of Budapest was once again elected in 1990. The national level leading body, the National Spiritual Assembly was first elected at the end of April 1992. The development of the community has been unbroken ever since.

According to the Britannica yearbook 2003, the Bahá'í world community numbering five million adherents is the second most widespread religious community on the globe after Christianity, *from a geographical point of view*. National level leading bodies are operating in more than 170 countries. There are more than 2000 peoples, nationalities and tribes represented among the believers; Bahá'í literature is translated into more than 800 languages. Everybody is equal in the community. Discrimination by race, religion, sex, colour of skin or level of education is unknown in the Bahá'í Faith.

The Bahá'í International Community has been present in the United Nations since 1948 and is conducting significant social and economic development activities on an international as well as on a national level. It serves the moral development of society by offering courses discussing general moral principles open to all, independent of religion.

A fundamental part of the teachings of the Faith is the equality of religions; members of the community take an active part in interfaith dialogue.

I. Notions, Special Terminology and Practice; Language

The word used for **denoting the religion** itself in the community is *Bahá'í Faith*, referring to the highly intimate and personal connection between the believers and God. „Religion” is mostly used in official correspondence. Further denotations appearing in the community are: *Cause of God, the Cause, the Faith, the faith*.

The Bahá'í Faith does not use the expression 'conversion' and excludes all forceful elements from the growth of the Faith. The activity when the Bahá'í teachings are made known to other people is called *teaching*.

Travellers who visit another locality or country with the objective of *teaching* the Bahá'í Faith for shorter periods of time are called *travel teachers*. If they spend longer periods in another country, they are *pioneers* because they are performing pioneering work for the Faith.

Between the 1920's and 1950's, the last one-person leader of the Faith, Shoghi Effendi sent outstanding Bahá'í personalities to certain targeted countries with the purpose of teaching the Faith.

Joining the Faith is not accompanied by formalized ceremonies, e.g., baptism, etc. It is enough that someone states that he is a Bahá'í. It is called *declaration*.

Members of the community most frequently call each other *friend*.

The Bahá'í Faith is not the only one among religions that does not have a clergy as it is understood in Christianity. An integral part of the religion is the **Administrative Order** that consists of two parts:

- on a local, national and international level, matters of the community are administered by elected bodies: the *Local Spiritual Assemblies*, the *National Spiritual Assemblies* and the *Universal House of Justice*, while
- *Auxiliary Boards* and *Counsellors* help in solving individual and community level problems. Their task is to give advice in the light of Bahá'í Scripture and teachings. In the early periods of the Faith, the leaders of the Faith were supported by *Hands of the Cause*.

The Administrative Order was established in the first half of the 20th century. At present, National Spiritual Assemblies operate in more than 170 countries and the number of Local Spiritual Assemblies is c. 12,000.

As long as the community is small in a particular country, the believers are helped by **another country**. In case of Hungary, this role was played by the Bahá'í community of the USA till the Second World War, then by the National Spiritual Assembly of Germany and Austria together till the beginning of the 1960's, after that, till 1992, when the National Spiritual Assembly of Hungary was elected, by the National Spiritual Assembly of Austria alone.

On an international level, the Bahá'í community uses English as the language of communication.

II. The Bahá'í Faith

The Bahá'í Faith is an independent revealed religion founded in Persia in 1844. Its birth was preceded by widespread messianistic expectations and hopes both in the Christian and the Muslim world. In fulfilment of the expectations prophesizing the advent of a great reformer or founder of a new religion (Mahdi/Qá'im) present in both branches of Islam, *the Báb* (ea., the Gate, original name: Siyyid 'Alí-Muhammad, 1819-1850) proclaimed that He is the One the believers have been waiting for for a thousand years on 23 May 1844. His claim aroused desperate opposition among the Shíite clergy in Persia as, according to His teachings, the legal foundations of their authority had been annulled by His advent. The Báb had first proclaimed a reform of Islám, then, in 1848, going beyond its pale, revealed that He brought a completely new religion into the world. He changed the laws regulating marriage, divorce, fasting and prayer and proclaimed the equality of women. After three years of relative freedom, the Báb was first imprisoned, then executed in 1850. Within a few years, twenty thousand believers of the new religion died a martyr's death under conditions parallels of which can only be found in the tortures of early Christians. A recurrent and central notion of the Báb's teachings was His prophecy about the advent of another, much mightier, founder of religion (*Man-Yuzhiruh'u'lláh – He Whom God shall Make Manifest*) Whom God will manifest in the „year nine”, on the „Day of Bahá”.

The Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, *Bahá'u'lláh* (ea. Glory of God – original name: Mírzá Husayn-'Alí Núrí, 1817-1892), was one of the outstanding followers of the Báb. In 1852, in the ninth year of the Bábí era, He had a mystical experience in a terrible prison in Tehran in which God revealed to Him that He was the one foretold by the Báb.

At the end of 1852, Bahá'u'lláh was exiled to Baghdad, then part of the Turkish Empire. In His writings revealed in this time, He taught mostly about the relationship between God and man, the nature of religion, the progressive development of religions as well as mystical questions. He also dealt a lot with the explanation of Christian and Muslim topics. On the continuous instigation of the Persian authorities, He was further exiled by the Turks first to Constantinople in May 1863 then to Edirne at the end of the same year. It was at the end of April 1863, before His departure from Baghdad, that He officially announced to His followers that He is the Promised One prophesied by the Báb. From Edirne, He addressed letters to the great rulers of His age, calling upon them to stop the armaments race, to make peace with each other and thus to lay the foundations of a peaceful world. He also warned them that should they not heed His admonitions, terrible wars would follow.

In 1868, together with His family, He was exiled to the most terrible prison of the Turkish Empire, Akká in the Holy Land. He first spent two years in prison then spent His remaining years in the city then in the vicinity of the city, under house arrest. His works revealed in this period (the most important being the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas – the Mostly Holy Book* – the book of laws of the Bahá'í Faith) deal mostly with the organization of the community and laws regulating community life and that of the individual. He passed away in the Mansion of Bahjí, near Akká, on 29 May 1892. His Shrine is the most important place for pilgrimage for Bahá'ís.

In His Last Will and Testament, Bahá'u'lláh conferred leadership of the community as well as the right to interpret His Writings with an authoritative effect upon His eldest son, *'Abdu'l-Bahá* (i.e., *Servant of Bahá* – 1844-1921). It was the first time in the world's religious history that the Founder of a great religion has unequivocally and in writing defined who should follow after His death as the leader of the community. Through this, as well as

through the fact that He had only conferred the right of providing an authoritative interpretation of His Writings upon him, He has also precluded secessions in His Faith.

Though not the founder of a religion Himself, Bahá'ís consider 'Abdu'l-Bahá as the immaculate example Whose behaviour in life all believers should emulate. 'Abdu'l-Bahá lead the community between 1892-1921, under renewed persecutions. The community that had mostly been concentrated in Iran has now started to put down roots in other countries as well (United States, England, Germany, Austria). He paid two major visits to the West between 1911 and 1913. He travelled to the United States as well as numerous Western countries. He also visited Budapest in April 1913, on invitation of Mr. Lipót Stark, the former president of the Theosophical Society. During the First World War, He organized an agricultural program for feeding the poor in the Holy Land.

In His Last Will and Testament, He conferred the leadership of the community as well as the right to interpret His Writings with an authoritative effect upon His eldest grandson, *Shoghi Effendi* (1897-1957). The Administrative Order of the Bahá'í Faith was established in Shoghi Effendi's time.

The Bahá'í Faith has no clergy. Communities are lead by annually elected nine strong local and national bodies. These so-called Local and National Spiritual Assemblies bear collective responsibility for leading the community. In their work, they are helped by consultants (on a local level, by Auxiliary Board Members, on a national level, by Counsellors). On basis of the guidance of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi started construction of the buildings of the World Centre of the Bahá'í Faith in Haifa, Israel.

The bloodline of the Holy Family was severed on the passing away of Shoghi Effendi. In 1963, leadership of the community was assumed by a nine-strong body, the *Universal House of Justice*, a body already foreseen in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá and expounded upon in detail in Shoghi Effendi's explanations, the election of which had been prepared for but not performed in the lifetime of Shoghi Effendi. Since then, the Universal House of Justice has been serving as the highest ranking leading body of the Bahá'í world community. It consists of nine members elected by the members of the National Spiritual Assemblies once in every five year. Its seat is in Haifa, Israel.

The Bahá'í Faith is a *new independent revealed religion*. Its appearance marks the commencement of the *collective coming of age* of humankind. The mission of the teachings that Bahá'u'lláh brought into the world is to lead mankind into this condition. Coming of age demands the creation of a society that does not question former loyalties (family, community, homeland) but adds another, fourth level: loyalty to mankind and the Earth. Only if people recognize their fundamental unity will they be able to establish a society much better and more humane than the one we have now. The vision of this world, that of the "thousand years reign" is also present in the Bahá'í Faith, in a highly concrete form. The Bahá'í community is tasked with fostering its coming into being.

According to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, there is only one *God*. There is no Jewish, Christian, Muslim or Bahá'í God. God leads mankind along a road only known to Him. The great world religions are all stations on this road defining the direction of the development of the world for the next c. one thousand years.

The *Founders of the great religions* (Abraham, Moses, Krishna, Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus Christ, Muhammad, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh – 'Sons of God' or, by Bahá'í terminology, 'Manifestations') all descend from the same God and are always conveying to Their followers teachings in line with the level of development of mankind in that particular age. They are not gods Themselves but infinitely more than mere human beings.

The great religious systems are always built around two trains of thought. One is that of the great fundamental spiritual teachings (cf., Ten Commandments) that are identical in all great religions. The other one is a string of social teachings the Founder gave to His followers for a specific period of time. As, due to the reinterpretations of the people, the brilliance of the original teachings always loses its shine during the centuries and their relative power also diminishes, it is necessary that God renew them time by time. This is the reason for why God is always sending down to the world a new world religion after c. one thousand years. The history of the development of mankind is thus, in the final count, the history of religions or, more closely, that of the teachings of the Founders of the religions building upon each other.

According to Bahá'u'lláh, each and every religion has a fundamental tenet its system of teachings is based on. The central teaching of the Bahá'í Faith is unity, unity of the world, of mankind and of religions.

In the Bahá'í teachings, man plays a unique role in creation here on Earth. The attributes of God are all present in man in latent form, they need to be unveiled and brought to the surface. It can be achieved by a moral and chaste life. Man's task here in this life is to develop the spiritual organs and senses one will need in the afterworld. Bahá'u'lláh brings the simile of the womb for our situation in this world: the fetus does not know why he/she would need to grow limbs, eyes, ears, etc., but if he/she were born into the next world without them he/she would be impaired. Likewise do we also have to develop the positive divine attributes (love, understanding, peace of soul, etc.) in ourselves because we will not be able to develop optimally in the next world without them. These divine attributes can mostly be brought to surface through the process of education.

The latter statement is also, at the same time, the definition of the cause of creation: man has been created to „reflect the greatness of God's glory”¹ and to know and worship Him: „I bear witness, o, my God that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee”...²

God has created man out of love and this is the link connecting man to God. The notion of love permeates the entire creation and man too. Man lives his/her own humanity through love.

Daily prayer, reading of the Holy Writings, the annual Fast and, on a social level, service to society are all organic parts of the everyday life of Bahá'í believers. They consider marriage and the family the basis of society. The importance of work is reflected by the fact that Bahá'u'lláh has elevated it to the rank of worship.

The framework for community life is set by the Nineteen Day Feast (the Bahá'í Faith has its own calendar with 19, nineteen day months) and the nine Holy Days.

The most important of the nine Holy Days are Naw-Rúz (new year - 21 March), and the Ridván period between 21 April – 2 May the first, ninth and twelfth days of which (21, 29 April and 2 May) are Holy Days. The Local Spiritual Assemblies, the leading bodies of the local communities are elected on the first day Ridván. National Spiritual Assemblies are also elected on one of the weekends of the Ridván period.

¹ Gleanings, XXXIV:1

² Bahá'í Prayers, Budapest, 2007, page 4.

Consultation, a unique problem solving method the believers used both individually and on a community level for discussing issues and finding the best solutions forms part of the Bahá'í teachings too.

According to the Britannica yearbook 2003, the Bahá'í world community numbering five million adherents is the second most widespread religious community on the globe after Christianity, from a *geographical point of view*. National Spiritual Assemblies are operating in more than 170 countries. The number of Local Spiritual Assemblies is more than 12,000.³ There are more than 2000 peoples, nationalities and tribes represented among the believers; Bahá'í literature is translated into more than 800 languages. Everybody is equal in the community. Discrimination by race, religion, sex, colour of skin or level of education is unknown in the Bahá'í Faith.

The Bahá'í International Community has been present in the United Nations since 1948 and has been supporting its work ever since. The Bahá'í International Community as NGO has been operating offices in the New York and the Geneva centres of the UN as well as in Brussels, at the European Union for years.

Followers of the Bahá'í Faith can practice their religion unhindered in most countries of the world.⁴ Sad exceptions to the above are some countries of the Muslim world where they are subject to oppression and persecution. The most pregnant example is Iran where some twenty thousand believers were murdered in organized and spontaneous pogroms or on basis of false accusations since the birth of the Bahá'í Faith (1844) and the community is still persecuted today.⁵

³ More detailed statistics see http://bahai-library.com/bolhuis_bahai_statistics_2001, though the list is concluded by 2001. The drop in the number of Local Spiritual Assemblies is due to the state administrative reform in India when thousands of municipalities were merged.

⁴ For more information about the high-level official recognition of the Faith in Ireland, Australia and the United Kingdom see: <http://www.bahai.hu/new/?tag=kormanyzati-elismeres>

⁵ For more details on the persecution of the community in Iran and the international reactions see: http://www.bahai.hu/new/?page_id=738

III. Sources to the History of the Bahá'í Faith in Hungary

Information used in the present summary come from the following sources:

A. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to Budapest, 1913:

- contemporary newspaper articles and other reports
- *Martha Root, Herald of the Kingdom*, ed. Z. Kinsky, Bahá'í Publishing Trust of India, New Delhi, 1983, pp. 361-370.
- a list prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice dated 11 March 1993.

B. History of the Bahá'í Faith in Hungary between 1913 and 1950:

- a summary prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice in 2004 detailing the correspondence Shoghi Effendi conducted with the believers in Hungary between 1921-1954. The summary has three parts: a *Memorandum* dated 18 October 1987 prepared for a previous research; *Notes* on the activities of Bahá'ís in Hungary, 1931-33 based on correspondence in the Bahá'í World Centre Archive; and an *Appendix* in 16 parts making part of the summary grouping correspondence by the writers of the letters.
- The memoirs of the first Secretary of the community, *Mrs. Renée Szántó Felbermann, Rebirth: The Memoirs of Renée Szanto-Felbermann*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust of England, 1980. It is a general recollection of the events of her life.
- *Hand-written memoirs of Renée Szántó Felbermann*, June 1974. This document is mostly about the writer's relation to the Bahá'í Faith.
- Numerous studies by *Mr. György Léderer* published at the end of the 1980's: *Bahá'ízmus Budapesten* (Bahá'ísm in Budapest). in: *Keletkutatás, autumn 1989.*, pp. 81-96.; *Goldhizer bahá'í levelezése* (Goldziher's Bahá'í Correspondence), in: *The Arabist*, 1988, pp. 103-109.; *Egy kicsiny világvallás: a bahá'ízmus* (A Tiny World Religion: The Bahá'ísm), in: *Világosság* 6, 1989, pp. 464-469.

C. History of the Bahá'í Faith in Hungary after 1950:

- 16 folders of correspondence in the Archives of the Bahá'í Community of Austria.

IV. The History of the Bahá'í Faith in Hungary, 1852-2011

The First Mentioning and the First Believer

The Bahá'í Faith is first mentioned in the 27 October 1852 volume of Magyar Hírlap (*The Hungarian Newspaper*), under the title „Persia műveltségi történetéhez” („*To the History of Education in Persia*”) where Captain Von Goumoens, a captain of the Austrian army based in Tehran reports on the terrible events related to the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran.⁶

The first Bahá'í of Hungarian origin was Aurélia Bethlen, a countess living in the USA who declared in 1906.⁷

1913: 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Visit to Budapest⁸

A decisive moment in the history of the Bahá'í Faith in Hungary was the visit to Hungary of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Son of the Founder of the Faith, Bahá'u'lláh, between 9-18 April 1913.⁹

'Abdu'l-Bahá visited Budapest at the age of 69 on invitation of Mr. Lipót Stark, Secretary General of the Theosophical Society, between 9-18 April 1913. He made two statements that can be of specific relevance today: „*Budapest will be one of the centres of the unification of East and West*” and „*the light will radiate from this city to other places.*”

Visitors called upon 'Abdu'l-Bahá every day, and He spoke about the spiritual unity of East and West. Professor Germanus, a well-known Orientalist took a group of young students of Turkish to Him. 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke fluent Turkish and the students were amazed at his linguistic proficiency. He expressed the hope that East and West will unite again. He emphasized that there is no East or West in reality because any point may be East and West in relation to another. This is why, He said, He is very happy to visit Hungary because this country sets the direction in the development of the East and Western culture is united with Eastern hospitality here.

On the evening of 11 April, 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke in the Old Parliament building (today: Centre of Italian Culture in Bródy Sándor street) in front of more than a thousand people. Martha Root, the Bahá'í travel teacher wrote as follows: „*This great holy teacher was introduced to the audience by Prelate Giesswein as Dr. Goldziher stood at 'Abdu'l-Bahá's right. Suddenly the people, as if sensing the deep significance of the moment, burst into tremendous applause. They felt, if they did not understand, that 'Abdu'l-Bahá standing between the Catholic Prelate and the Jewish Orientalist represented the reconciliation of these two great religions. ... All seats were occupied while many stood in the gallery; aisles and corridors were crowded and a line extended even to the street! Members of Parliament, members of philosophical and philological societies, university professors, artists, Catholic*

⁶ Magyar Hírlap, 27 October 1852, page 906. The picture of the article can be downloaded from: http://www.bahai.hu/new/?page_id=274#toc-regi-ujsgcikkek-1852

⁷ Dr. György Léderer: Baháizmus Budapesten [Bahá'ism in Budapest]. in: Keletkutatás, autumn 1989, page 93

⁸ The detailed description of the events and the related articles can be found under: www.bahai.hu

⁹ For more details see: www.bahai.hu

priests, Protestant clergymen, representatives of modern religious movements, women's organizations, Esperantists, members of social and humanitarian societies, many nationalities, many races were present – in a word the gathering reflected the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh."¹⁰

On 12 April, He invited many of His friends to Hotel Ritz. One of them, the founder of the Magyar Turáni Társaság (*Hungarian Turánian Society*) invited Him to talk in the National Museum. There He spoke about the high culture of the Turán and how it had perished because of religious clashes and conflicts. When asked which place will be the centre of peace, 'Abdu'l-Bahá replied: „*the country where the requirements for peace will be first created shall be the centre of peace*”.

During the course of the last days of His stay in Budapest, 'Abdu'l-Bahá received invitations to the homes of numerous high-born and distinguished persons. One of them was Count Albert Apponyi. The count explained to 'Abdu'l-Bahá that his objective is also to create lasting peace based on justice and peace of the spirit and not on the turns of fortune of unforeseeable political changes. He told 'Abdu'l-Bahá the followings: „*Hungary has always been in the middle of the conflicts that had shaken the world in the past century. And if there is a nation that is interested in the setting up of a new order that is based on law and not force, harmony and co-operation rather than rivalry, if there is a nation for which the creation of this peace is of paramount importance, it is the Hungarian.*”

'Abdu'l-Bahá only gave permission twice in His life for painters to paint Him. During His stay in Budapest, He granted three sittings to Dr. Róbert Nádler, Professor of painting at the Royal Academy of Arts, on request of the latter.

The painter later remembered the event like this: „*When I saw 'Abdu'l-Bahá, He was already in His seventieth year. His charming personality had a deep impression on me and I wanted to paint His features very much. He agreed to come to my studio but said that He is very busy so He can only grant me little time. I could not but wonder seeing the expression of complete peace, pure love and endless benevolence on His face. He saw everything in such a goodly light, He found everything beautiful, the external life of the city as much as the souls of its inhabitants. He praised the location of the city, the great Danube crossing the city, the good water and the people. He had such beautiful thought! He inspired me, and as I knew I did not have much time, I worked with full concentration.*”¹¹

'Abdu'l-Bahá and His entourage left Hungary by train on 18 April. There were numerous devoted friends of Him to meet and say good-bye to Him at the train station. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said that He ignited a flame while in Budapest and once its light becomes visible to all, everything is going to change.

He explained that the beginning of a tree is only a little seed but once it starts to develop and grown, it will yield beautiful fruits. He assured those present that if they arise to serve the holy Teachings devotedly, the Hosts of the Almighty will rally to their support, the Cause of God will progress in Hungary and they will be victorious.

'Abdu'l-Bahá and Arminius Vámbéry

¹⁰ Martha Root, *Herald of the Kingdom*, ed. Z. Kinsky, Bahá'í Publishing Trust of India, New Delhi, 1983, pp. 361-370.

¹¹ The painting was later displayed in Róbert Nádler's studio and believers visiting Hungary often visited it. The painting was bought by the Bahá'is in the 1970's and can now be found in the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa.

According to Star of the West¹², Arminius Vámbéry „met Him [’Abdu’l-Bahá] during His stay in Budapest twice and visited Him once in His hotel, in response to His earlier visit to him. His knowledge of Oriental languages, mostly that of Persian, Arabic and Turkish was wonderful. During his conversation with ’Abdu’l-Bahá, he said the followings: *’I have been following your teachings for many years and have always wanted to meet with you in person. I admire your courage, above all that at such an old age you left everything else behind and are travelling in the world spreading your humane teachings. You are doing a marvellous work. Your work will be met by success because your sincerity, unshaken faith and high ideals have had their mark on the minds of the great thinkers of the world.’* His last words, as he said good-bye to ’Abdu’l-Bahá in his study were as follows: *’I hope to hear from you. When you return home in the East please send me your Father’s Writings and Treatises and I will do my best to spread them in Europe. The more these principles spread the closer will we get to the age of Peace and Brotherhood’*”¹³

Somewhat later, Arminius Vámbéry wrote the following letter to ’Abdu’l-Bahá:

I FORWARD this humble petition to the sanctified and holy presence of Abdul-Baha Abbas who is the centre of knowledge, famous throughout the world and beloved by all mankind. O thou noble friend who art conferring guidance Upon humanity, may my life be a ransom to thee!

The loving epistle which you have condescended to write to this servant and the rug which you have forwarded came safely to hand.

The time of the meeting with your excellency and the memory of the benediction of your presence, recurred to the memory of this servant and I am longing for the time when I shall meet you again. Although I have traveled through many countries and cities of Islam, yet have I never met so lofty a character and so exalted a personage as your excellency and I can bear witness that it is not possible to find such another. On this account, I am hoping that the ideals and accomplishments of your excellency may be crowned with success and yield results under all conditions; because behind these ideals and deeds I easily discern the eternal welfare and prosperity of the world of humanity.

This servant, in order to gain first hand information and experience, entered into the ranks of various religions; that is, outwardly I became a Jew, Christian, Mohammedan and Zoroastrian. I discovered that the devotees of these various religions do nothing else but hate and anathematize each other, that all these religions have become the instruments of tyranny and oppression in the hands of rulers and governors and that they are the causes of the destruction of the world of humanity.

Considering these evil results, every person is forced by necessity to enlist himself on the side of your excellency and accept with joy the prospect of a fundamental basis for a universal religion of God being laid through your efforts.

I have seen the father of your excellency from afar. I have realized the self-sacrifice and noble courage of his son and I am lost in admiration.

For the principles and aims of your excellency I express the utmost respect and devotion and if God, the Most High, confers long life, I will be able to serve you under all conditions. I pray and supplicate this from the depths of my heart.

Your servant,

¹² Star of the West: a Bahá’í periodical published between 21 March 1910 and March 1935, in 25 volumes.

¹³ Star of the West, Volume 4, Issue 17. Quoted by: Léderer György: Bahá’izmús Budapestén [Bahá’ism in Budapest]. in: Keletkutatás, autumn 1989., pp. 81-96.

Vámbéry”¹⁴

Arminius Vámbéry passed away on 15 September 1913. The Bahá’í Faith considers him the first believer in Hungary.

Teachers of the Bahá’í Faith in Hungary in the 1920’s and 30’s

It were *travel* teachers primarily from the USA and the German speaking countries of Europe who started to teach the Faith in Hungary in the 1920’s; they played a major role in the formation of the Bahá’í community till the end of the thirties:

- Ms. Martha Root, an outstanding teacher of the Faith who taught in numerous countries of the world. It was due to her activities that Queen Marie of Romania, a granddaughter of Queen Victoria became a Bahá’í in the 1930’s.¹⁵
- Mrs. Ruhangiz Bolles and Miss Jeanne Bolles: mother and daughter, they usually taught together.
- Ms. Marion E. Jack: visited Budapest in 1933; she is mostly known in the Bahá’í Faith because of her teaching work in Bulgaria.
- Ms. Louise Gregory: visited Budapest in 1926 and 1927.
- Ms. Bertha Matthiesen: spent a lot of time in Hungary between 1937 and 1939 – most *declarations* occurred and the first Local Spiritual Assembly of Budapest was also elected in this period.
- Mr. Emeric Sala (Imre Szalavetz): a Canadian Bahá’í of Hungarian origin born in Transylvania (now part of Romania), member of the newly formed National Spiritual Assembly of Canada from 1948. He visited Budapest in 1933 and 1937.
- Ms. Lorol Schopflocher: visited Budapest in March-April 1937.

As the above teachers spoke English and German, it was natural that they focused their activities on strata of society where they could make themselves understood: the intellectual circles in Budapest. A significant part of the intelligentsia in the capital was Jewish or of Jewish descent at that time; *they also became the first Bahá’ís*.

The teachers spoke in Esperanto and English language clubs, at feminist meetings but also gave major presentations, e.g. Martha Root spoke „at a university” before 600 people in 1933.¹⁶

¹⁴ The letter originally written in Persian was first published in the Egyptian Gazette on 24 September 1913., in English translation. It was first published in Hungarian in Rusztem Vámbéry’s Preface to J.E. Esslemont, Bahá’u’lláh and the New Era, Gergely, 1933

¹⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marie_of_Romania

¹⁶ Letter of Martha Root to Shoghi Effendi, 12 April 1933. in: Summary prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Notes on the activities of Bahá’ís in Hungary, 1931-1933, p. 3.

The First Believer after 1920; Supporters

More widespread *teaching* activities commenced in 1926, with the stay in Budapest of Martha Root. She taught the Faith to one of the grandsons of Arminius Vámbéry, Mr. György Vámbéry (address: Budapest, I., Bérc u. 9.), and Ms. Irma Szirmai (address: Budapest, Perczel Mór u. 2.).¹⁷

- **Mr. György Vámbéry** was 21 at the time and he declared as a result of Martha Root's teaching.¹⁸ He is considered the second Bahá'í in Hungary. He passed away in 1928, at a young age.¹⁹

Ms. Irma Szirmai was the Vice Chairperson of the Feminist Club. Though she never became a Bahá'í, she sympathized with the Faith²⁰, and regularly offered her apartment for Bahá'í meetings from 1926 till the second half of the thirties.

Among other supporters and persons actively helping the Bahá'ís, mention is to be made of Dr. Róbert Nádler (see above), Mr. Menyhért Szántó²¹ (retired Deputy State Secretary) and his family, certain members of the family of Mr. Lipót Stark (see above), and Miss Poli Marczali (the daughter of Henrik Marczali, the well-known historian).

Mr. Ignác Goldziher also gave numerous talks in order to make the Bahá'í Faith known at the beginning of the 1930's.²²

The First Book in Hungarian: J. E. Esslemont, Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era

On initiative of Martha Root, Mr. György Steiner, an Esperantist in the city of Győr translated J.E. Esslemont's Bahá'u'lláh and The New Era into Hungarian between 1931-33. The book gives a general presentation of the Faith and its teachings. This was the first major work published in Hungarian about the Bahá'í Faith.²³ The Preface of the book was written by Mr. Ruzstem Vámbéry, grandson of Arminius Vámbéry, proof-reading was done by Ms. Irma Szirmai and Mr. Lajos Szimonidész²⁴. The latter also participated in the translation work.

¹⁷ Letter of Martha Root to Shoghi Effendi, 25 January and 8 March 1926, in: Summary prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Appendix 1.

¹⁸ Letter of Louise Gregory to Shoghi Effendi, 19 January 1927. in: : Summary prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Appendix 9.

¹⁹ Letter of Martha Root to Shoghi Effendi, 15 August 1929. in: Summary prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Appendix 2.

²⁰ Letters of Irma Szirmai to Shoghi Effendi, 31 August 1932, 27 July 1936 and 21 April 1937, in: Summary prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Notes on the activities of Bahá'ís in Hungary, 1931-1933; Appendix 8..

²¹ Father-in-law of Renée Szántó-Felbermann, the later Secretary of the Budapest community.

²² Letter of Louise Gregory to Shoghi Effendi, 1 and 9 November 1932. in: : Summary prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Notes on the activities of Bahá'ís in Hungary, 1931-1933

²³ J.E. Esslemont: Bahá'u'lláh és az új korszak, Gergely, 1933. The book was published in a reprint edition by the National Spiritual Assembly of Austria in 1979.

²⁴ Mr. Lajos Szimonidész: cultural historian, Lutheran priest, later army bishop who also wrote a book about the world's religions: A világ vallásainak története (*History of the Religions of the World*)..

- **Mr. György Steiner** declared in 1931.²⁵ He passed away in 1934.

After his passing away, as confirmed by The Bahá'í World, there existed a youth group in the city of Győr.²⁶

The First Bahá'í Community in Budapest and its Religious Life; Election of the First Local Spiritual Assembly

As a result of the teaching activities of primarily Martha Root and Bertha Matthiesen, then Renée Szántó-Felbermann and the community itself, a total of twelve adults and a youth declared their faith.

Members of the community:

- **Mrs. Renée Szántó-Felbermann**²⁷: writer, journalist, later Secretary of the community
- **Ms Malvina Keitner**²⁸: housemaid at Pension Gröbel
- **Ms. Jenny Komlós** (later: **Weisz**)²⁹: secretary assistant and typist. Translated Bahá'u'lláh's Hidden Words into Hungarian during the Second World War.
- **Ms. Erzsébet Fleischmann** (later: **Berczel**)³⁰: language teacher
- **Dr. Erzsébet Görög**³¹: physician (dentist)
- **Ms. Mária Kleinberger** (later: **Kenesei**)³²: cashier in a shopping centre, Esperantist, Chairperson (or Vice Chairperson) of the Esperanto Club
- **Ms. Etel Vértesi**³³: graphologist

²⁵ Letter of György Steiner to Shoghi Effendi, 3 April 1931. in: Summary prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Notes on the activities of Bahá'ís in Hungary, 1931-1933, p. 1.

²⁶ The Bahá'í World 5 (1932-34), Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Illinois, p. 377.; Letter of Ruhangiz and Jeanne Bolles to Shoghi Effendi, 8 January 1937. in: Summary prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Appendix 6.

²⁷ Hand-written memoirs of Renée Szántó Felbermann, June 1974, p. 7. This hand-written memoir is an important source of the history of the community. Her book entitled Rebirth only mentions a few names, the hand-written memoirs, however, mention much more.

²⁸ Letter of Jeanne Bolles to Shoghi Effendi, 29 August 1937. in: : Summary prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice., Appendix 6 Hand-written memoirs of Renée Szántó Felbermann, June 1974, p. 7.

²⁹ Letter of Ms. Jenny Komlós (Weisz) to Shoghi Effendi, 8 August 1937. in: Summary prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice., Appendix 13.; Hand-written memoirs of Renée Szántó Felbermann, June 1974, p. 7.; confirmed by a letter of introduction by the Local Spiritual Assembly of Los Angeles, 22 June 1977.

³⁰ Letter of Ms. Erzsébet Fleischmann (later: Berczel) to Shoghi Effendi, 24. June 1937. in: : Summary prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice., Appendix 13.; Hand-written memoirs of Renée Szántó Felbermann, June 1974, p. 7.

³¹ *To the process of the declaration*: Letter of Bertha Matthiesen Bolles to Shoghi Effendi, 6 May 1937. in: : Summary prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice., Appendix 6.; *about the declaration*: Hand-written memoirs of Renée Szántó Felbermann, June 1974, p. 8.

³² Letter of Bertha Matthiesen to Shoghi Effendi, 8 April 1938. in: : Summary prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Appendix 10.; Hand-written memoirs of Renée Szántó Felbermann, June 1974, p. 8.

³³ Letter of Bertha Matthiesen to Shoghi Effendi, 28 April 1938. in: : Summary prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Appendix 10.; Hand-written memoirs of Renée Szántó Felbermann, June 1974, p. 8.

- **Mr. István Barta**³⁴: painter born in Hódmezővásárhely
- **Miss Josey Michael**³⁵: a young British lady living in Budapest. A representative of Who's Who, danced in the Budapest Ballet, and taught English to the children of Governor Miklós Horthy. She returned to England in 1940 where she continued serving in the Bahá'í community.
- **Ms. Franciska Wertheimer**³⁶
- **Mr. Jenő Sugár**³⁷: retired Counsellor of a Ministry, the oldest member of the community
- **Mrs. Jolán Sugár (Jenőné Sugár)**³⁸, wife of Jenő Sugár
- **Miss Erzsébet Sugár**, daughter of the Sugárs. The Sugár family was the first full-Bahá'í family.

Miss Eszter Tóth, the daughter of poet Árpád Tóth has also participated in the work of the community for years but she has never declared herself as a Bahá'í.³⁹

As the teachers teaching the Faith in Hungary primarily moved in intellectual circles in Budapest, *almost all members of the first Bahá'í community in Budapest were Jews*. Unfortunately, due to the atmosphere reigning in this period, this fact did not make it possible that the Bahá'í Faith become known to many soon.

Between 1933-1937, the community held regular meetings in Pension Gröbel at Kossuth tér, they organized public talks and also taught the Faith in apartments.⁴⁰ In 1937, during the stay of Ruhangiz and Jeanne Bolles in Budapest, numerous articles appeared about the Bahá'í Faith, in, e.g., 8 órai újság, Ujság, Nemzeti újság.⁴¹ After the departure of Mrs. Bolles, Renée Szántó-Felbermann, the Secretary of the community was ordered to appear before the police where the police accused the Bahá'ís of Communist subversion.⁴² Finally, they could continue holding meetings but a police investigator always had to be present. Thus, after 1937, they could not organize public talks anymore because nobody dared to offer them facilities and the presence of the police investigator also had a deterring effect on those present. From this time on, they met in private apartments,⁴³ in the flats of Irma Szirmai and

³⁴ Letter of István Barta to Shoghi Effendi, 30 January 1947. in: Summary prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Appendix 13.; Hand-written memoirs of Renée Szántó Felbermann, June 1974, p. 9.

³⁵ Letter of Jeanne Bolles to Shoghi Effendi, 29 August 1937. in: Summary prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Appendix 6: „*spoken about the Faith to both of the Sons (whom she knows well) of Miklós Horthy, the regent of Hungary*”; according an e-mail of her son, Mr. Tim Clapham written to the Secretariat of the Hungarian Bahá'í Community, on 26 June 2009, she taught English to the sons of Governor Horthy; Hand-written memoirs of Renée Szántó Felbermann, June 1974, p. 10.

³⁶ Hand-written memoirs of Renée Szántó Felbermann, June 1974, p. 10.

³⁷ Letter of Bertha Matthiesen Bolles to Shoghi Effendi, 8 April 1938. in: Summary prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Appendix 10.; Hand-written memoirs of Renée Szántó Felbermann, June 1974, p. 10.

³⁸ Letter of Mrs. Jolán Sugár and Miss Erzsébet Sugár to Shoghi Effendi, 5 June 1938. in: Summary prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Appendix 13.; Hand-written memoirs of Renée Szántó Felbermann, June 1974, p. 10.

³⁹ Letter of Eszter Tóth to Shoghi Effendi, 8 June 1937. in: Summary prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Appendix 12.

⁴⁰ Letter of Bertha Matthiesen to Shoghi Effendi, 13 December 1937. in: Summary prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Appendix 10.

⁴¹ 8 órai újság, 15 May 1937.; Ujság, 13 June 1937.; Nemzeti újság 6 August 1937.

⁴² Letter of Renée Szántó-Felbermann to Shoghi Effendi, 21 October 1937. in: Summary prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Appendix 15.

⁴³ Hand-written memoirs of Renée Szántó Felbermann, June 1974, p. 9.

Erzsébet Fleischmann⁴⁴ as well as in the apartment of Renée Szántó-Felbermann in the Lipótváros district.

With the promulgation of the so-called „Jewish Acts” and the approach of World War II, the conditions that they were living under put an increasingly heavy burden on the community.

„The group is 100% Jewish. – wrote Bertha Matthiesen to Shoghi Effendi – *Conditions in Hungary are bordering on, if not equalling those which existed in the Dritte Reich.*⁴⁵ „The atmosphere is very tense here – she writes in another letter -, and any movement which includes our Jewish brothers rests under a shadow of suspicion. Mrs. Stark tells me that they are in a state of panic and many are busy arranging and looking forward to the time which they seem to feel is almost inevitable.”⁴⁶

Such were the conditions under which the **Local Spiritual Assembly of Budapest**, the first Bahá’í institution in the history of Hungary, was elected on 21 April 1939. According to the description of Renée Szántó-Felbermann, they could not even meet in Budapest: „It was at their (the Sugárs) house in Alag (today part of Budakeszi) that we elected the first Spiritual Assembly in the history of Hungary, Ridván 1939. When we boarded the train for Alag, in order to avoid suspicion, we Bahá’ís did not remain together, but went by twos and threes. The same procedure was repeated on our arrival to Alag. It was a memorable, unforgettable evening, that Feast of Ridván in the small house at Alag fragrant with spring flowers. We were all deeply moved. And our dear Bertha Matthiesen was radiant. ... Jenő Sugár was elected chairman, Mária Kleinberger became treasurer and I continued as secretary.”⁴⁷

The community continued to regularly meet but only in private apartments and in secrecy. There were two more souls to join them:

- **Ms. Teréz Iszakovics:** an acquaintance of Franciska Wertheimer and
- **Ms. Brigitta Vadász:** an acquaintance of Teréz Iszakovics.⁴⁸

Events of the next years are lost in the maelstrom of the War. The correspondence, our main source of information stops, and the memoirs of Renée Szántó-Felbermann also focus more on personal tribulations. Unfortunately, acceptance of the Bahá’í Faith did not save the members of the first community from deportation and the concentration camp. Even Renée Szántó-Felbermann – whose husband and his family were well-known Unitarians – could only be freed from a death march together with her two-year old son after immense

⁴⁴ Letter of Bertha Matthiesen to Shoghi Effendi, 24 March 1938. in: Summary prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Appendix 10.

⁴⁵ Letter of Bertha Matthiesen to Shoghi Effendi, 13 December 1937. in: : Summary prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Appendix 10. The statement is opposed by Renée Szántó-Felbermann according to whom there were two Catholics among them: Hand-written memoirs of Renée Szántó Felbermann, June 1974, p. 10.

⁴⁶ Letter of Bertha Matthiesen to Shoghi Effendi, 4 February 1938. in: Summary prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Appendix 10. The Mrs. Stark mentioned by her was most probably the wife of Lipót Stark.

⁴⁷ Hand-written memoirs of Renée Szántó Felbermann, June 1974, p. 10.; members of the newly elected Local Spiritual Assembly sent a postcard to Shoghi Effendi. in: Summary prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Appendix 14.

⁴⁸ Hand-written memoirs of Renée Szántó Felbermann, June 1974, p. 11.

difficulties by her husband. We can only hope that God gave them strength in this period of tribulations the way of how He gave it to Renée Szántó-Felbermann through Bahá'í prayers.⁴⁹

The New Start after the War, Proscription of the Community in 1950

Concerning the restart of the religious life of the Bahá'ís who had survived the terrors of the *shoa*, our source, once again Renée Szántó-Felbermann, writes as follows: „*Jenő Sugár died in Dachau, Etel Vértesi was deported – all traces of her are lost – my best co-worker, Franziska Wertheimer, passed on in March 1945, two weeks after the death of her husband. ... A member of our community is now in London, another in Paris, a third in Sweden; and ten of us here are starting a new life.*”⁵⁰

As the date of the letter is August 1947, these ten must have already included

- **Dr. Elemér Bencze**, a medical student, later gynecologist, whose life had been saved in a death march by a Polish Bahá'í.⁵¹

There was one more believer to join the community before the proscription:

- **Ms. Tessza Faludy**⁵²

After the War, the Hungarian Bahá'ís established regular contacts with Western and Iranian believers. Community life recommenced in the Szántó-Felbermann family's apartment under 33 Hidegkúti út. For a while, they could practice their religion free and though the Bahá'í Faith was not an officially recognized denomination, the Faith was registered in the Ministry of the Interior where the non-recognized denominations belonged. The believers established good relations with the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education, a representative of the Ministry was also present at a Naw-Rúz celebration and they even organized an exhibition of the publications printed before the War.⁵³

The Local Spiritual Assembly of Budapest was reelected in 1948.⁵⁴ Its members were as follows:

- **Renée Szántó-Felbermann**
- **Mária Kenesei (Kleinberger)**
- **Erzsébet Berczel (Fleischmann)**
- **Tessza Faludy**
- **Jolán Sugár**
- **István Barta**

⁴⁹ Hand-written memoirs of Renée Szántó Felbermann, June 1974, pp. 11-16.; Renée Szántó-Felbermann: Rebirth, Bahá'í Publishing Trust of England, 1980, pp. 124-156.

⁵⁰ Letter of Renée Szántó-Felbermann to Shoghi Effendi, 31 August 1947. in: Summary prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Appendix 15.

⁵¹ Hand-written memoirs of Renée Szántó Felbermann, June 1974, p. 17.

⁵² Hand-written memoirs of Renée Szántó Felbermann, June 1974, p. 18.

⁵³ Hand-written memoirs of Renée Szántó Felbermann, June 1974, p. 17.; Rebirth p. 158.

⁵⁴ Postcard sent to Shoghi Effendi with signatures of the members, 21 April 1948. in: Summary prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Appendix 14.

- **Malvina Keitner**
- (... more illegible signatures)

This event which was of great importance for the Bahá'ís was reported on a postcard sent to Shoghi Effendi as follows: „*We have just elected the Spiritual Assembly. Deepest love and devotion! Please pray for us.*”

The fledgling community life was severed for decades by the intervention of the secret police. Renée Szántó-Felbermann remembers the events as follows: „*At the end of 1950 ... I received a summons to present myself at the Hungarian Ministry of the Interior... The official ... submitted a paper to me asking me to sign a declaration to the effect that the Bahá'í of Hungary ceased their activities v o l u n t a r i l y.*” He then aimed a serious threat at her and her family. Still, Szántó-Felbermann did not sign the paper but consulted with the Bahá'ís about what to do. „*On the following morning, with a very heavy heart, I went to the Ministry of the Interior and put my signature under the declaration. ... Thus our little community was dissolved, and we only came together as friends, two or three at the time, over a cup of tea. For us it was a bitter blow. But as far as I know we were not the only „tolerated religion” that was forcibly dissolved in those days. Several other smaller religious communities shared our fate.*”⁵⁵

Just like with the Catholic monastic orders a little bit earlier, so has the terror of the Communist state reached the Bahá'í community too. Among the Bahá'í teachings one can find the tenet that as long as the believers are not forced to act in a way that would clearly go against the teachings of their religion and it is not demanded of them to rescind their faith, they accept the laws of the state where they live. Thus, all forms of organized community life ceased in Hungary but the believers did continue practising their faith individually and secretly.

Most Bahá'ís left the country in 1956 [*during or after the Revolution*].

From the 1960's till Today

The careful resumption of activities has started in 1965. Ludmilla von Sombeek, a Bahá'í from Vienna who visited the country this year found three Bahá'ís in Budapest:⁵⁶

- **Mária Kenesei (Kleinberger)**, a member of the pre-war community,
- **István Barta**, another member of the pre-war community, and
- **Mrs. Hermione Isaac**⁵⁶, an American Bahá'í born in Krakow, Poland whose husband was Hungarian and who moved to Hungary as *pioneer* in 1963, at the age of 80 (!). She lived in Budapest till 1978.

In the same year, Mrs. von Sombeek met at an Esperanto conference in Vienna

⁵⁵ Renée Szántó-Felbermann, *Rebirth*, p. 163.

⁵⁶ Report of Ludmilla van Sombeek to the Universal House of Justice about her teaching trip to Hungary, 12 August 1965.

- **Mrs. Eta Szász**, an Esperantist and performing artist who declared somewhat later at an Esperanto congress in Scandinavia, thus becoming the first Hungarian believer after 1956.⁵⁷

From the 1960's, some believers of Hungarian origin who had *declared* in the West started to return to Hungary to *teach* the Faith: Mrs. Angéla Szepesi and Mrs. Kathleen Gale Bond from Canada; and Ms. Nora de Buda from Portugal who summarized their experiences in Hungary after each of their visits. Teaching work was mostly concentrated on strengthening the existing believers.⁵⁸

It was not easy to teach the Faith between the sixties and the first half of the eighties: the people were not only afraid of provocateurs because of the word „religion” but also because the Bahá'í Faith was unknown in the country. It is probably due to these factors that the community was only growing slowly.

There were the following believers living in Budapest in the mid seventies:⁵⁹

- **Eta Szász**
- **Hermione Isaac**
- **Julie van Vliet (Mrs. Tiborné Tímár)**, a Dutch Bahá'í and university student who married a Hungarian
- **Ms Erzsébet Halmágyi**⁶⁰
- **Mrs. Bojulkieva Bogdana**, already a Bahá'í for 40 years⁶¹

Another soul who has joined the community in 1979 was:

- **Ms. Tessza Gyurkóczy**, piano teacher⁶².

From 1979, Austrians and other Western citizens did not need a visa to travel to Hungary anymore, thus there were an ever growing number of travel teachers to arrive to Hungary.

The first Bahá'í to declare outside Budapest was

- **Mr. Pál Rézsó**, from Kisújszállás⁶³

At the beginning of the 1980's, numerous young Bahá'ís came to Hungary with the specific purpose of living in Hungary for longer periods of time and teaching the Faith here:

⁵⁷ Verbal report by Eta Szász and Barbara Männig.

⁵⁸ JUTA summary, June 1978. (JUTA was the Teaching Committee set up by the National Spiritual Assembly of Austria for coordination of teaching work in Yugoslavia, Hungary and Czechoslovakia.)

⁵⁹ On basis of the card indexes in the archives of the National Spiritual Assembly of Austria.

⁶⁰ Report of Nora de Buda, 20. September 1975.

⁶¹ She was taught the Faith by Ruhangiz and Jeanne Bolles. Letter of the National Spiritual Assembly of Germany to the European Teaching Committee, 2 April 1976.; letter of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Austria, 4 July 1976.

⁶² Letter of the National Spiritual Assembly of Luxemburg to the National Spiritual Assembly of Austria, 30 September 1979.

⁶³ Letter of Pál Rézsó to Angéla Szepesi, 5 May 1980.

- **Miss Barbara Männig**, economist from West-Germany who is still living in Hungary⁶⁴
- **Mr. Hans Marsch** business administration specialist⁶⁴
- **Mr. Gian Farid** medical student⁶⁵

As a result of their teaching work, two friends declared:

- **Dr. István Ács** agricultural engineer and
- **Mrs. Vera Fehér**⁶⁶

Due to the organizing work of the pioneers, elements of community life were rekindled: Nineteen Day Feasts and Holy Days were held, firesides (open evenings) were offered for seekers, etc.

In 1989, the Faith could already be taught completely freely. At the beginning of the year, the Hungarian community counted 12 members in 3 municipalities (Budapest, Pécs, Szeged).⁶⁷ By September 1989, the number grew to 12, in 6 municipalities.

The first so-called Summer School, a one-week event where the believers could listen to talks about different teachings of the Faith, its history, etc., was held in 1989. The Summer School has been organized each year since then.

From 1989, the community has regularly participated in the Budapest International Book Fair, in order to present its newly published books.

After the proscription of 1950, the Local Spiritual Assembly of Budapest was reelected first in 1990.⁶⁸ It was followed by the Sopron, Szeged and Debrecen Assemblies in 1991-1992.⁶⁹

The first National Spiritual Assembly in the history of Hungary was elected at Ridván 1992, at the end of April.⁷⁰

At the beginning of April 1993, the Community celebrated the eightieth anniversary of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to Budapest with an international conference in commemoration of which a plaque was also placed in the garden of the National Museum. At that time, there were already more than two hundred believers in the country.

The Hungarian Bahá'í Community was registered by the Budapest Court on 26 August 1993.

⁶⁴ JUTA report to the Universal House of Justice, October 1980

⁶⁵ Barbara Männig and Hans Marsch arrived in 1980, Gian Farid followed in 1983.

⁶⁶ JUTA report, 20 March 1984.

⁶⁷ JUTA report, beginning of 1989.

⁶⁸ Letter of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Austria, 6 December 1989.

⁶⁹ Bahá'í hírek (Bahá'í News), April 1991. vol. 1.; September-October 1991. vol. 4.; June 1992. vol. 9.

⁷⁰ Bahá'í hírek, April 1992. vol. 8.

V. The International Character of the Bahá'í Faith; the Bahá'í International Community⁷¹

An Independent Revelation

The Bahá'í Faith is a new, independent revealed religion with its own Holy Books, vision of God and positive moral teachings.

In the past 160 years, the Faith had itself accepted in all parts of the world as an independent religion and not a sect.

- On request of two courts and the Ministry of Justice between 1925-1929, the Chief Mufti of Egypt officially stated that the Bahá'í Faith is not part of Islam.⁷²
- The Constitution Court of the Federal Republic of Germany decided in 1991 „*that the nature of the Bahá'í Faith as a religion and the religious nature of the Bahá'í community is unequivocal from the point of view of cultural traditions and general and religious studies interpretation alike*”.⁷³
- In France, it was an interministerial commission of inquiry to decide that the Faith is not a sect.⁷⁴

The Bahá'í World Community in Figures

According to the Britannica yearbook 2003, the Bahá'í world community numbering five million adherents is the second most widespread religious community on the globe after Christianity from a *geographical point of view*. National Spiritual Assemblies are operating in more than 170 countries. The number of Local Spiritual Assemblies is more than 12,000. There are more than 2000 peoples, nationalities and tribes represented among the believers, Bahá'í literature is translated into more than 800 languages. Everybody is equal in the community. Discrimination as per race, religion, sex, colour of skin or level of education is unknown in the Bahá'í Faith.

The largest communities can be found in India, Iran, the United States, Vietnam, Kenya and Bolivia.⁷⁵

The Bahá'í Holy Places in Israel are UNESCO World Heritage sites.⁷⁶

International Activity

On an international level, Bahá'í believers of the world are represented by the Bahá'í International Community (BIC). It has been present as an NGO in the United Nations since 1948. It has offices in New York and Geneva and holds consultative status with ECOSOC,

⁷¹ To this part, in general see: www.bahai.org, the official site of the Bahá'í world community, and www.bahai.hu, the official site of the Hungarian Bahá'í community.

⁷² Shoghi Effendi: God Passes By), Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Illinois, USA, 365-369.

⁷³ Urteil 2BvR 263/86=BVerfGE 83,341 vom 05.02.1991

⁷⁴ D'Alain Vivien: Les Sectes. Editions Odile Jacob - Septembre 2003.

⁷⁵ http://www.adherents.com/largecom/com_bahai.html

⁷⁶ http://www.geographic.hu/Civilizacio/2008/07/Uj_vilagoroksegi_helyszinek_kepekben_II;
<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1220>

UNICEF and UNIFEM, and is in daily working relations with numerous specialized UN agencies (UNESCO, WHO, UNEP, UNDP) too. It has been operating an office in Brussels since 2007.

The task of BIC is to foster the coming into being of a civilization serving the continuous development of mankind and to make such a civilization sustainable, on basis of the Bahá'í teachings.

Among the main lines of the external work of BIC one can find:

- Protection of the community in Iran that has been subject to grave persecution since the birth of the Faith there as well as protection of the Bahá'ís in all other countries where their rights are violated.
- Participation in numerous UN conferences and NGO-cooperations, mostly in the field of human rights⁷⁷, „education and equality among the sexes”⁷⁸, and „social”⁷⁹ and sustainable development⁸⁰.

BIC also publishes periodical statements about pressing issues in the world.⁸¹

The Bahá'í Community does believe that world peace is possible. The road leading to it has been delineated in a document of major import by the Universal House of Justice, the leading body of the Bahá'í Faith in 1985.⁸²

Social Commitment

The Bahá'í Community is an open community sensitive to social issues. As part of the social commitment making part of the Bahá'í teachings, there are so-called social and economic development projects running in all parts of the world.⁸³ At present, their number is c. 1400; there are more than 300 Bahá'í schools in operation in the world.

Throughout the world, the communities offer courses open to all who are interested in spiritual and moral issues. Membership in the Bahá'í Faith is not a requirement; the documents, though inspired by the Bahá'í teachings, discuss basic moral principles:

- children are taught basic moral and behavioural norms in *children's classes*
- the age group of 11-15 years is offered moral education in *junior youth groups*
- *prayer meetings* are open to all age groups and use Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í prayers for making the soul peaceful and for refreshing it
- people above 15 think together in *study circles* about the relationship between God and man, about life and death, the conduct of life, the history of religions, etc.

⁷⁷ In general, see: <http://bic.org/areas-of-work/human-rights/?searchterm=human%20rights>; concrete actions: http://www.onecountry.org/e194/e19404as_HR_Discourse_at_BIC_story.html

⁷⁸ For the education of girls and women see: <http://news.bahai.org/story/809>; the situation of women: <http://bic.org/assets/CSW%202011.pdf>

⁷⁹ For development of skills and getting rid of poverty: <http://news.bahai.org/story/809>

⁸⁰ For alternatives of a consumer society: <http://news.bahai.org/story/772>

⁸¹ <http://statements.bahai.org/95-0303.htm>

⁸² Promise of World Peace – A Statement by the Universal House of Justice, Hungarian translation: Budapest, 1989; 1992.

⁸³ <http://info.bahai.org/social-economic-development.html>

In Hungary, **MESÉD (Mothers telling stories)**, a project of the Unity in Diversity Foundation founded by the Hungarian Bahá'í Community is run in the Nyírség region. It is a *pilot project of the European Roma Strategy of the Hungarian EU presidency* .

Interfaith Activity

As the equality of religions as systems of teachings originating from the same God makes a fundamental part of the teachings of the Faith, and as it also acknowledges their Founders as equals, it is natural to Bahá'í believers to take an active part in interfaith discourse.

Members of the community participated in the wording of *World Ethos – A Declaration of the Parliament of World Religions*⁸⁴, participate in the work of the Parliament⁸⁵, work in United Religions Initiative⁸⁶ groups, etc.

In 2002, the Universal House of Justice addressed a document to the leaders of the world's religions, calling upon them to reconcile with each other. The letter was shared with thousands of leaders in different countries.

In the first years of the 21st century, contacts have been established between the Holy See and the Bahá'í world community; on invitation of the Catholic Church, members of the Community participated and spoke in the interfaith conference organized in India.⁸⁷

Representatives of the world community have been invited to the World Religious Summit in 2010, a meeting rallying the religious leaders of the G8 countries⁸⁸ and have been present in numerous other conferences tackling pressing social issues from a religious perspective⁸⁹.

In Hungary, the Bahá'í community organizes regular interfaith meetings in Szeged⁹⁰ where representatives of the world religions discuss different highly relevant issues: love, evaluation of the economic crisis from a religious point of view, family and raising of children, etc., and its participants are also present in the Fellowship of Interreligious Dialogue⁹¹.

⁸⁴ Hungarian translation: Világetosz – a Világvallások Parlamentjének nyilatkozata, Egyházfórum, Budapest, 1997

⁸⁵ <http://news.bahai.org/story/741>

⁸⁶ www.uri.org

⁸⁷ http://bahai-library.com/uhj_dialogue_new_delhi

⁸⁸ <http://news.bahai.org/story/779>

⁸⁹ http://www.onecountry.org/e201/e20101as_Hague_Interfaith_Conference_story.html

⁹⁰ More: <http://www.bahai.hu/new/?tag=vallaskozi-parbeszed>

⁹¹ www.vallaskoziparbeszed.hu