

## From Budapest to Lake Balaton

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The theme for the Eighth International LCJE Conference is Jewish evangelism – telling the story. According to the program, many stories are going to be told. I will begin with one about why are we not in Budapest but here at Hotel Helikon, in the town of Keszthely, a name that is difficult to pronounce for those of us who do not know Hungarian; consequently, this conference will go down in history as the LCJE Lake Balaton Conference 2007.

This is the fifth international LCJE conference that I, as organizer, am responsible for. Each conference has its own stories, its own joys, its own challenges, its own difficulties. But the conference this year beats them all when it comes to the question of venue and contract between hotel and LCJE.

We left the LCJE conference in Helsinki in 2003 with the following suggestions for venue for this conference: Mexico, South Africa, Prague, Berlin, Budapest, Korea, Turkey and Israel. No shortage of choices! Personally I would have preferred it to be in Malta. At the ICC meeting in Toronto, April 2004, it was decided “to hold the conference somewhere in Eastern Europe, and the cities of Budapest, Prague and Berlin were mentioned. It was up to the International Coordinator and the conference committee [composed of Tuvya Zaretsky, Bodil F. Skjøtt and myself] to make the final decision.”

March 10-13, 2005 the Eighth European LCJE Conference was held in Révfülöp, not far from this place and also on the shore of Lake Balaton. At that time we could not possibly imagine that the Eighth International LCJE Conference would be held here. But we, Bodil F. Skjøtt and myself, had been charged by ICC to first go for Budapest as the site for the 2007 conference – the city which has played a major role in European Jewish history and also in the history of Jewish evangelism. Buda-Pest or, as the town was unkindly called by some in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century: Juda-Pest. “Pest” in German translates as plague in English.

We had done our homework. After the European conference at Lake Balaton we went to Budapest, and in the evening of March 13 we put up at Hotel Agro. A hotel with conference facilities on the outskirts of Budapest, beautifully situated and recommended to us by others who had held Christian conferences there.

And bingo! Already the next morning, on March 14, 2005, we had a signed contract for a conference August 9-14, 2007 at Hotel Agro. We went sightseeing in the afternoon and saw the big synagogue, the second largest in the world. Sure, it is good to be organizer of an LCJE conference!

Subsequently I created some confusion about the dates when we wrote about the conference in the LCJE Bulletin. At the LCJE meeting in Pittsburgh at the end of April 2006 I had to say about the conference in Hungary: “Unfortunately we have been giving misleading information in the LCJE Bulletin about the dates for the conference. The conference will be held from the 9th to the 14th of August 2007 – Deo Volente!” God willing!

But it was not to be like that. On our return to Denmark from Pittsburgh in early May, Bodil F. Skjøtt and I took contact to Hotel Agro with reference to our contract of March 2005 – just to keep up the connection, you know. But at Hotel Agro in Budapest they were unable to find the contract – they said! A new management had taken over the hotel, they informed us. So again we had to hit the road for Hungary.

In June we then go to Budapest – and now ally ourselves with LCJE members Géza Endreffy and Ferenc Kozma – only to be told that the hotel has been booked by a different group in the same period obviously for a big festival (and probably at a better price). We start looking for other hotels in Budapest, persistently maintaining the dates; we know that LCJE folks are busy leaders who have appointments even in a distant future. But those hotels we can find, with help from Hotel Agro, are at a much higher price. There was nothing for us to do but to grin and bear it. We then change the dates of the conference to August 19-24 – and succeed in getting a contract. Contract no.

2. It takes some time, a good many emails and telephone conversations to get them to send the contract to us, but on July 29, 2006 I can sign it. Well, there is more than a year to the conference and doesn't the Good Book tell us not to worry?

But lo and behold!

During of the summer of 2006 we were in touch with potential speakers for the conference. A potential Hungarian speaker was Professor Anne-Marie Kool, who regrettably had to decline the invitation. She tells us this in a mail of November 11, 2006, which also has the surprising information: "Last week I visited Hotel Agro in preparation for the IMAS 2008 consultation, which we have planned to held also at Hotel Agro. I was informed to my great surprise that Hotel Agro has been sold one and a half month ago, and will be turned into an old people's home ..."

I shudder to think what would have happened if we had not had this contact with Anne-Marie Kool. We immediately ask Géza Endreffy to look into it; and quite right: Hotel Agro confirms this in a mail of November 14, 2006 – after our representative has been to the hotel: "The building has been sold and now it has a new owner. The new owner does not intend to operate the building as a hotel but as a home for elderly people."

I now felt at the end of my tether. Of course I could have answered Hotel Agro that at an LCJE conference there are quite a few elderly people, potential residents at the future Agro Old People's Home. Or that an LCJE conference has quite a bit to do with "nursing", so what about a third contract? We refrained from doing this. And we also politely refused Hotel Agro's manager's offer to help us find another hotel. Instead we did some hard thinking and went on the internet and kept up contact with other organizers of conferences who had been in a similar situation. The possibility that we at this moment, nine months before the conference, may have to cancel it altogether crosses our minds. But this simply cannot be, we tell each other.

We examine the possibilities of having the conference in Berlin, in Warsaw, in Krakow, or even in Denmark. I would love to arrange a conference in Wonderful Copenhagen! It was possible in all these places but at a much higher price. We finally get in touch with Melba Tours, led by the good Baptist Peter Barbarics in Budapest, and give him the assignment to hold on to the time and the price and find a hotel in Budapest or somewhere else in Hungary.

In the beginning of December 2006 we are back in Hungary. What a privilege to be a member of the LCJE conference committee! Just imagine, to be able to visit Hungary once more – at LCJE's expense!

On our arrival Peter Barbarics has done his homework. He takes us to this hotel, Hotel Helikon, Keszthely at Lake Balaton. After negotiations with the hotel we decide to accept the terms and we get a contract, the third, which is signed and guaranteed by Melba Tours. And members of LCJE are told about these changes in mid-December 2006.

The third contract holds. Now we are here. Therefore once again: Welcome to the LCJE Lake Balaton Conference 2007.

And as we usually tell each other when we are at a place where there are other guests: we do not involve ourselves in active evangelism, but we will be pleased to tell people who we are and what we stand for and what Jesus means for us, if and when we are asked about it

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