

Csanad Szegedi, Hungary Far-Right Leader, Discovers Jewish Roots

Friday, 17 August 2012

BUDAPEST, Hungary -- As a rising star in Hungary's far-right Jobbik Party, Csanad Szegedi was notorious for his incendiary comments on Jews: He accused them of "buying up" the country, railed about the "Jewishness" of the political elite and claimed Jews were desecrating national symbols.

Then came a revelation that knocked him off his perch as ultra-nationalist standard-bearer: Szegedi himself is a Jew.

This file photo dated on June 7, 2009, shows Hungary's far right party, Jobbik's, Csanad Szegedi, left, and Krisztina Morvai, right, celebrating their entry into the European Parliament after the European parliamentary election in Budapest, Hungary. (AP Photo/Bela Szandelszky, File)

Following weeks of Internet rumors, Szegedi acknowledged in June that his grandparents on his mother's side were Jews – making him one too under Jewish law, even though he doesn't practice the faith. His grandmother was an Auschwitz survivor and his grandfather a veteran of forced labor camps.

Since then, the 30-year-old has become a pariah in Jobbik and his political career is on the brink of collapse. He declined to be interviewed for this story.

At the root of the drama is an audio tape of a 2010 meeting between Szegedi and a convicted felon. Szegedi acknowledges that the meeting took place but contends the tape was altered in unspecified ways; Jobbik considers it real.

In the recording, the felon is heard confronting Szegedi with evidence of his Jewish roots. Szegedi sounds surprised, then offers money and favors in exchange for keeping quiet.

Under pressure, Szegedi resigned last month from all party positions and gave up his Jobbik membership. That wasn't good enough for the party: Last week it asked him to give up his seat in the European Parliament as well. Jobbik says its issue is the suspected bribery, not his Jewish roots.

Szegedi came to prominence in 2007 as a founding member of the Hungarian Guard, a group whose black uniforms and striped flags recalled the Arrow Cross, a pro-Nazi party which briefly governed Hungary at the end of World War II and killed thousands of Jews. In all, 550,000 Hungarian Jews were killed during the Holocaust, most of them after being sent in trains to death camps like Auschwitz. The Hungarian Guard was banned by the courts in 2009.

By then, Szegedi had already joined the Jobbik Party, which was launched in 2003 to become the country's biggest far-right political force. He soon became one of its most vocal and visible members, and a pillar of the party leadership. Since 2009, he has served in the European Parliament in Brussels as one of the party's three EU lawmakers, a position he says he wants to keep.

The fallout of Szegedi's ancestry saga has extended to his business interests. Jobbik executive director Gabor Szabo is pulling out of an Internet site selling nationalist Hungarian merchandise that he owns with Szegedi. Szabo said his sister has resigned as Szegedi's personal assistant.

In the 2010 tape, former convict Zoltan Ambrus is heard telling Szegedi that he has documents proving Szegedi is Jewish. The right-wing politician seems genuinely surprised by the news – and offers EU funds and a possible EU job to Ambrus to hush it up.

Ambrus, who served time in prison on a weapons and explosives conviction, apparently rejected the bribes. He said he secretly taped the conversation as part of an internal Jobbik power struggle aimed at ousting Szegedi from a local party leadership post. The party's reaction was swift.

"We have no alternative but to ask him to return his EU mandate," said Jobbik president Gabor Vona. "Jobbik does not investigate the heritage of its members or leadership, but instead takes into consideration what they have done for the nation."

Szegedi's experience is not unique: The Holocaust was a taboo subject during Hungary's decades of communist rule that ended in 1990, and many survivors chose to keep their ordeals to themselves. Russian far-right firebrand Vladimir Zhirinovskiy was anti-Semitic until he acknowledged in 2001 that his father was Jewish.

Szegedi, who was raised Presbyterian, acknowledged his Jewish origins in June interviews with Hungarian media, including news broadcaster Hir TV and Barikad, Jobbik's weekly magazine. He said that after the meeting with Ambrus,

he had a long conversation with his grandmother, who spoke about her family's past as Orthodox Jews.

"It was then that it dawned on me that my grandmother really is Jewish," Szegedi told Hir TV. "I asked her how the deportations happened. She was in Auschwitz and Dachau and she was the only survivor in the extended family."

Judaism is traced from mother to child, meaning that under Jewish law Szegedi is Jewish. Szegedi said he defines himself as someone with "ancestry of Jewish origin – because I declare myself 100 percent Hungarian."

In the interview with Hir TV, Szegedi denied ever having made anti-Semitic statements, but several of his speeches and media appearances show otherwise.

In a November 2010 interview on Hungarian state television, Szegedi blamed the large-scale privatization of state assets after the end of communism on "people in the Hungarian political elite who shielded themselves in their Jewishness."

Speaking on a morning program in late 2010, he said that "the problem the radical right has with the Jews" was that Jewish artists, actors and intellectuals had desecrated Hungary's national symbols like the Holy Crown of St. Stephen, the country's first Christian king.

Szegedi also complained of "massive real estate purchases being done in Hungary, where – it's no secret – they want to bring in Israeli residents."

Szegedi met in early August with Rabbi Slomo Koves, of Hungary's Orthodox Chabad-Lubavitch community, whose own parents were in their teens when they discovered they were Jewish.

"As a rabbi ... it is my duty to receive every person who is in a situation of crisis and especially a Jew who has just now faced his heritage," Koves said.

During the meeting, Szegedi apologized for any statements which may have offended the Jewish community, and vowed to visit Auschwitz to pay his respects.

Koves described the conversation as "difficult and spiritually stressful," but said he is hopeful for a successful outcome.

"Csanad Szegedi is in the middle of a difficult process of reparation, self-knowledge, re-evaluation and learning, which according to our hopes and interests, should conclude in a positive manner," Koves said. "Whether this will occur or not is first and foremost up to him."

(Huffingtonpost.com)