



70 Days for 70 Years

Remember the past to build the future

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Anti-Semite and Jew – The Double Life of a Hungarian Politician

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The day was chilly but clear, the crowd energetic. Some were in quasi-military uniform, others in hooded sweatshirts emblazoned with patriotic symbols. Dozens of flags fluttered in the breeze. The red-white-and-green tricolor of modern Hungary was prominent, but so was a flag with red and white stripes, remembered by most Hungarians as the symbol of the wartime Fascists. There were hundreds of banners bearing the word “Jobbik,” shorthand for Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom—Movement for a Better Hungary—the name of Hungary’s far-right political party.

Jobbik's supporters had gathered outside the offices of the European Commission in Budapest to denounce the European Union. Like many other Euroskeptic parties, Jobbik objects to the multinational European project, and to criticisms of any sort from Brussels. Unlike others, Jobbik dresses up its attacks on Europe with theatrics. This demonstration, in January, 2012, was no exception. Gábor Vona, the Party's photogenic young leader, stood in front of a giant slogan, "Shall We Be Members, or Shall We Be Free?"—a pun on a famous line by Sándor Petőfi, the great poet of Hungary's 1848 revolution, "Shall we be slaves or shall we be free?"—and called for Hungary's withdrawal from Europe.

Another Jobbik leader, Előd Novák, dressed in what appeared to be a black Mao jacket, doused a European Union flag with lighter fluid and set it on fire. As the crowd shouted "Let it burn!," a Jobbik member of parliament stamped on the flag. "Perish, European Union!" he cried.

Csanád Szegedi, a former vice-president of Jobbik, also made a speech that day. Szegedi, one of three Jobbik members elected to the European Parliament, called on Hungary to hold a referendum on leaving Europe. Grinning, he then denounced the élites who had "made us believe that if we enter the European Union it would bring us to Canaan." Instead, he continued, E.U. membership "just brought us a whole lot of Canaanites." The crowd laughed, instantly getting the joke: rather than lead the country to the Promised Land, the European upper crust had supposedly brought Hungary a whole lot of "Jews." The fact that Jews, with or without E.U. membership, make up a tiny proportion of the Hungarian population—about a hundred thousand out of nearly ten million—didn't stop the laughter.

The crowd, varied in age and attire, was a testament to Jobbik's political success. When the Party was founded, in 2003, most of its leaders, including Szegedi, Vona, and Novák, were university students. But their sharp use of xenophobic rhetoric—specifically, anti-Roma—very quickly helped the Party win support. Throughout the country, a large and unassimilated Roma population—up to ten per cent in some cities, and the majority in some villages—competes with ethnic Hungarians for jobs. After a Roma gang murdered a Hungarian schoolteacher, in 2006, Jobbik's leaders began floating the idea of creating "public order zones," where Gypsies would be placed under heavy police control, and boarding schools, where Roma children would be segregated. In 2010, Jobbik won nearly seventeen per cent of the national vote and forty-seven parliamentary seats—a very high number for a far-right party in Europe.

But over time the anti-Roma rhetoric began to wear thin, and Jobbik's leaders understood that in order to grow they would have to find new scapegoats. When Hungary's economy and its currency, the forint, crashed in 2008 and 2009, public anger focussed on banks and international capital markets. In Hungary, as elsewhere in Europe, Jews have been historically associated with banks and finance, and Jobbik's leaders suddenly realized that they could generate a lot of attention by employing anti-Semitic rhetoric as well.

Usually, Jobbik's anti-Semitism is implied rather than overt. Last spring, the Party magazine, *Barikád* (*Barricade*), featured three Hungarian party leaders on its cover: a Socialist (left), a member of the Democratic Coalition (center-left), and a member of the ruling Fidesz, or Hungarian Civic Alliance (center-right), lined up beneath the Israeli flag. The meaning was clear: all three parties supported Israel—and, by implication, the Jews. Only Jobbik is different.

The vigor of Jobbik's rhetoric surprised many. During the Nazi occupation, in 1944 and 1945, more than five hundred and fifty thousand Hungarian Jews, mostly from the provinces, were killed in concentration and extermination camps.

Today, Hungary's Jewish population is less than a fifth of what it was before the war, and is overwhelmingly concentrated in Budapest, the capital. While ethnic Hungarians do have real conflicts with Roma in rural Hungary, the Jews are hardly visible in much of the country.

Blatant anti-Semitism is a risky electoral strategy—the majority of Hungarians would not support it—and so Jobbik's leaders deny that they are anti-Semitic. But they drop hints that their voters understand. Most of Europe's right-wing parties are anti-Muslim. Jobbik loudly and frequently criticizes Israel, and has ostentatiously invited Iranian businessmen to Budapest to meet with Party leaders. In 2010, Vona and Szegedi held a rally around a statue of Mihály Károlyi, a Roman Catholic aristocrat who was Hungary's Prime Minister during the First World War. In an almost avant-garde mashup of symbols, they put a kippah on the statue's head and a sign in his arms that read, "I am responsible for Trianon"—implying that the peace treaty signed in 1920 in Trianon, which diminished Hungary's territory by two-thirds, was the fault of the Jews.

Such tricks and games are familiar in the post-Communist countries of Eastern and Central Europe. Because Hungarian Communists repressed, denied, or distorted Hungarian history, Hungarian film and theatre directors raised the nonverbal "symbol"—visual political commentary, comprehensible to viewers but invisible to censors—to something close to an art form. István Szabó's film "Mephisto," the story of a collaborationist actor in Nazi Germany, was famously interpreted by Hungarian audiences in the nineteen-eighties as a metaphor about Communist collaboration. Conspiracy theories also have special power in Hungary, where the government really was the puppet of a foreign power.

Because bad economic decisions have stifled growth, there is also a pervasive, even paranoid sense that "we haven't got what we were promised." Democratic politics have only complicated matters: the country has long been sharply divided between the Socialists, who grew out of the former Communist Party, and the Fidesz Party, which grew out of a center-right dissident youth group. In this ossified climate, Jobbik's founders saw that there was an opening for a party that would speak for "true Hungarians" against a political establishment that they maintained had been secretly cultivated by foreigners and Jews.

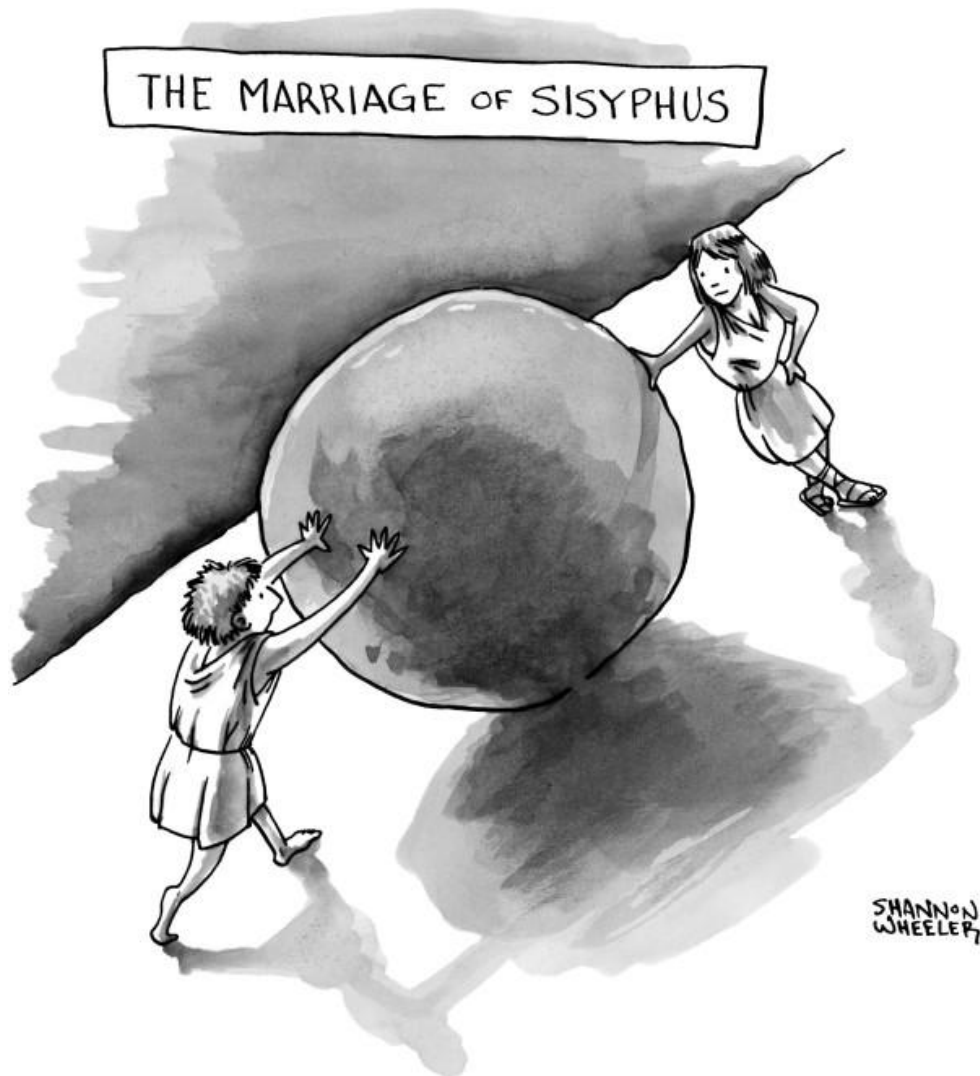
No one in Jobbik understood this political landscape better than Csanád Szegedi, who told the Canaanite joke at the flag-burning rally, and few were in a better position to exploit it. Szegedi joined the Party when it was founded, in 2003. He was twenty-one, and rose quickly through the ranks. He worked on Party policy in Budapest, and as a Party organizer in his home town, Miskolc, a crumbling industrial city whose high unemployment and large Roma population made it a Jobbik stronghold.

Szegedi was also the first to figure out how to market Jobbik's ideology. In 2009, he and Vona formed the media company Hungarian News, Ltd., which publishes *Barikád*. Earlier, in 2006, along with Gábor Szabó, a Party founder, he had opened a shop in Budapest, called Turul. Named for the Turul bird, a symbolic creature that figures in ancient Hungarian mythology, Turul sold "100% made in Hungary" T-shirts, belt buckles, flags, and posters featuring far-right symbols and maps of "greater Hungary"—with its pre-First World War borders, including parts of today's Romania and Slovakia. It marketed "nationalist" heavy-metal music with lyrics such as "White Christmas, white Christmas . . . I hate the stinking Gypsies."

Turul's products were meant to appeal to young people who were bored by old-fashioned, churchgoing conservatives. Often, the designs were pagan, intended to invoke a pre-Christian, ethnically pure Hungarian past. Szegedi published a political autobiography in which he claimed to

be descended from a “thousand-year-old” Hungarian family, tracing his father’s ancestors back to pre-Christian Hungary. He also led a campaign to revive Old Hungarian runes—the script used before the Latin alphabet—and to place runic signs across the country. When he married Krisztina Hornyák, in 2008, he had his wedding ring inscribed with runes, too.

But the Turul shop benefitted far more from one of Szegedi’s other projects. In 2007, he helped to organize the Hungarian Guard, a paramilitary group whose members wore black uniforms designed to evoke the Arrow Cross, Hungary’s wartime Fascist party. The Guard practiced military drills and, in a number of towns, staged “anti-Gypsy-crime” marches, which sometimes ended in violence. The Guard offered an identity, an organization, and activities that appealed particularly to young people. Thousands joined Jobbik after the Guard’s formation, and many of them bought uniforms, hats, boots, flags, and badges at Szegedi’s Turul shop. In 2009, the courts ordered the Guard to disband. Nevertheless, Szegedi made his first appearance in the European Parliament wearing the Guard uniform. According to one Polish politician, he was instantly mistaken for an electrician.



The Hungarian Guard, however short-lived, altered the character of Jobbik. Members drawn in by the Guard were less educated, and even more radical, than the students who had founded the Party. Anti-Semitic jokes were heard more frequently at rallies, and a Web site, called kuruc.info (after the Kuruc, anti-Habsburg rebels of the seventeenth century), began to play a significant role in Jobbik's internal politics. Kuruc.info rails against "outsiders" of all kinds. Its best-known column, "Gypsycrime," collects anti-Roma "facts." There is a "Jewcrime" feature as well; one recent article, accompanied by a caricature of a hook-nosed man, his face spread onto a lampshade, jeered at the "myth" of Auschwitz. Contributors, who are anonymous, regularly post the names, photographs, and telephone numbers of "liberal"—i.e., Jewish—journalists, intellectuals, and public figures, and call on readers to harass them by mail or by phone. During the 2010 election, kuruc.info was the third most widely read news Web site in Hungary. Its readership has since dropped, but its influence is clear: a poll last year showed that sixty-three per cent of Hungarians feel hostile toward Jews, up from forty-seven per cent in 2009.

Kuruc.info is run out of a server in Healdsburg, California, by a Hungarian-American with extreme-right views. This makes it impossible for the Hungarian government to shut it down. Officially, Jobbik has no relationship with the explicitly racist Web site, because, officially, Jobbik is not anti-Semitic. But Barikád advertises on kuruc.info, and Jobbik offers the site support in other ways. When Szegedi was elected to the European Parliament, he began to make regular, public payments out of his parliamentary staff budget to three men widely known to work at kuruc.info. One of them was Előd Novák, the Party leader who poured lighter fluid on the European Union flag.

Szegedi is vague about his reasons for paying Novák, pointing to pressure or even coercion. "Everybody knew," he said, that Novák and his colleagues had to be "respected." Novák told me that he was paid for "communications consulting work."

But six months after he spoke at the flag-burning rally, Szegedi stopped those payments and abruptly resigned from Jobbik altogether. An astonishing story had broken: Csanád Szegedi—founder of the Hungarian Guard, purveyor of nationalist kitsch, teller of anti-Semitic jokes—had discovered that he was Jewish. His maternal grandmother, now in her nineties, is a survivor of Auschwitz.

I met Szegedi last spring, in the offices of Chabad Lubavitch in Budapest. He was accompanied by Rabbi Slomó Köves. The two make an odd-looking pair. Köves is a short, round, impish man with a long red beard and flawless Brooklyn English, which he learned at an American yeshiva. Szegedi, who speaks little English, is tall and broad, with a black mustache and goatee that would not look out of place on a Habsburg cavalry officer. He now wears a kippah.

Szegedi sent a text message to Köves a week after he resigned from Jobbik, asking to meet. He wanted to talk to someone "authentic" about his newly discovered Jewishness, and had seen the rabbi's name in a newspaper.

At first, Köves told me, "I thought someone was kidding around with me." But as a Lubavitch rabbi, he said, if somebody wants to meet to discuss his Jewishness, "I don't really have any choice."

The experience was memorable. “It’s very shocking to see a person whom two weeks ago you saw on TV as one of the main figures of an anti-Semitic party,” Köves said. “Not only to learn that he was a Jew but to see him totally broken. On the one hand, you have mercy on such a person, naturally. On the other hand . . . he has a very big responsibility, not only toward Jews but in general, in whatever Hungary got up to in the last few years.”

Others I spoke to in Budapest used the word “broken” to describe Szegedi in this period; he had lost his friends and his place in the political milieu that he had helped to create. Szegedi told Köves at their first meeting that he wanted to apologize for his role in creating Jobbik. He’d already apologized to his grandmother, he says, “but I felt it was not enough.”

The Lubavitch movement is dedicated to the “reconversion” of nonobservant Jews, and Köves felt that he might help Szegedi find a different way to live. To begin with, he advised Szegedi to stop speaking to the media—a promise that he has mostly kept until now. He pushed Szegedi toward what he called “soul work”: efforts to understand himself, and to understand the Jewish religion. He invited him to Friday-night services and to Shabbat dinner afterward. When Szegedi walked into the synagogue, many were angry, and some refused to shake his hand.

Szegedi had never been inside a synagogue, and described feeling deeply out of place. Putting a kippah on his head, he told me, “felt so strange. . . . It was as if it were burning my head.” He wasn’t surprised that members of the congregation were angry; what surprised him was that a number followed the rabbi’s example and acted politely: “Some people were prepared to help me take the first steps.”

A few weeks later, Szegedi agreed to attend a summer course in “basic Judaism,” organized by Köves and another rabbi. In one session, the group talked about anti-Semitism. Szegedi, Köves remembers, was “sitting with big eyes, and asks this question about Shimon Peres.”

In 2007, Peres, the President of Israel, gave a speech at a business conference in Tel Aviv. Bragging about the success of Israeli foreign investments, he declared that Israeli businessmen “are buying up Manhattan, Hungary, Romania, and Poland. Thanks to talent, connections, dynamism, we get almost everywhere.” This sound bite made it onto YouTube, and Jobbik seized upon it, citing a secret plot by Israelis to colonize Hungary.

When Szegedi asked about Peres’s speech, Köves paused. “I was a little bit shocked,” he recalled. “And then I realized, This guy really believes this. So, if I want him not to believe it, I’ve got to explain why this is nonsense. I can’t just tell him, ‘You’re stupid.’ He needs ammunition to explain why it’s not true.”

The misleading Peres anecdote has the power of the more traditional “blood libel”: it’s a “fact”—the “proof” is the YouTube clip—that serves as the basis for a broader set of conspiracy theories. Jobbik leaders cite this fictional colonization plot as a justification for their anti-Israeli rhetoric, and for their coded anti-Semitism. Jobbik’s official spokesman, Márton Gyöngyösi, has cited the speech to explain that “if Peres is supporting colonization it is a natural reaction for people to feel that Jews are not welcome here.”

Köves asked Szegedi if he’d seen the whole speech—he hadn’t—and asked him to think about what “buying up Hungary” might mean. Couldn’t it, Köves pointed out, have to do with Israeli

companies in Budapest creating jobs for Hungarians, and not plotting the colonization of the country?

Szegedi listened. And, for the first time in his life, he was psychologically prepared to hear another side of the story.

It wasn't altogether remarkable that Szegedi hadn't known that he had a Jewish grandmother. The Holocaust convinced many European Jews who survived the Second World War that they could never be accepted as equal citizens in their own countries, that they would always be marked in some way. The vast majority of survivors, whether from Hungary, Poland, or Germany, emigrated. But many of those who stayed, especially in Communist Europe, disguised their background, because they were afraid, because they didn't want to stand out, or because they wanted to forget the past and move on.

Almost every Budapest Jew knows someone who discovered his or her Jewish origins as an adult. Köves himself is the son of a Jewish man who disappointed his fearful Jewish mother by marrying a Jewish woman. "My grandmother decided after the war that the main goal of her life was to make all of her children marry non-Jews," he told me. Köves's decision to become religious put him at odds with his secular, assimilated family.

Szegedi's grandparents made a similar decision. After his grandmother returned from Auschwitz, she never wore short sleeves, so that no one would see her tattoo. His grandfather had been in a Hungarian internment camp, and they both felt that it was better not to tell their daughter Katalin, born in Miskolc in 1953, anything about their past. According to Szegedi, "My grandfather thought that for sure there would be deportations again, and there would be a Holocaust again. As fast as we can, we have to assimilate, evaporate, so as to save the family in the future."

Only when Katalin—Szegedi's mother—was a teen-ager did her father reveal that she was "of Jewish origin." But, as Szegedi explains, he reassured her that the family was no longer Jewish. They were Christians. "My grandfather made her promise that she would marry a non-Jew so that assimilation would happen in the fastest way possible."

When she did eventually marry, her parents told their son-in-law that they had once been Jewish but were done with that now. Szegedi's father accepted that explanation. His in-laws were delighted when he developed into a Hungarian "nationalist."

At that time, in the nineteen-seventies and eighties, Hungarian nationalists went to church and marched on Hungarian national holidays, activities that had been discouraged or banned by the Communists and weren't necessarily xenophobic, anti-Semitic, or anti-Roma. But, even then, there were complicated undertones. Some of the Stalinists who ran Hungary immediately after the war were Jewish—most notably, Mátyás Rákosi, the general secretary of the Hungarian Communist Party in the late forties, and several early bosses of the Hungarian secret police.



To make matters even more complex, that generation of Communists cynically tried to deflect anti-Semitism in other directions. Knowing that their economic policies were failing, and knowing that they were personally disliked, they tried to channel public anger about shortages and hyperinflation onto “speculators” and “black marketeers,” who sometimes appeared on propaganda posters with hook noses. In 1946, Rákosi gave a speech in Miskolc, calling for black marketeers to be “hanged on the gallows.” A few days later, a mob carrying signs that read “Death to the Jews” and “Death to Black Marketeers” killed a Jewish trader. Two days later, another angry crowd lynched a Jewish police officer.

The deaths were covered up, and Szegedi never learned about them. Sent to a Protestant high school, he learned very little about Jews at all. He studied the Holocaust, but the teaching of history was in turmoil in the post-Communist nineties. Previously repressed topics such as the anti-Communist revolution of 1956 were revived. Other stories that schoolchildren had been told in the past—of Hungary’s allegedly heroic wartime Communist partisans, for example—were removed from the curriculum. One of Szegedi’s teachers showed his class a film, banned from theatres, that questioned how many had died at Auschwitz. Szegedi knew that, in the past, banned films had sometimes told the truth: Was the Holocaust yet another Communist exaggeration?

At home, Szegedi’s father, who ran a small company in Miskolc, was given to telling anti-Semitic jokes, the same kind that Szegedi heard at school. His mother never objected. He remembers being reprimanded only once: when he was about eight, and watching boys playing noisily in the street, he said to his mother, “Listen to all of that Jewish yelling.” She slapped his face and told him, “I don’t want to hear you speaking like that anymore.” The lesson he took from that, he says, is that “Jewishness must be something very bad if I can’t talk about it.”

By contrast, in the nineteen-nineties a newly resurgent brand of xenophobic nationalism gave the adolescent Szegedi self-confidence and a sense of mission—in his words, “a strong feeling of belonging somewhere.” He sought out friends and teachers who thought this way, too, then read the books and watched the films that they recommended. Inside the closed circle of the Hungarian far right, certain ideas were growing more common: Gypsies were sapping Hungary’s vigor. Jewish Communists were responsible for Hungary’s poverty. Foreigners and Jewish intellectuals sought to undermine Hungary’s sovereignty, to “sell out” the country once again.

In 2002, when Szegedi was twenty, he was drawn to the Fidesz Party, and to its leader, Viktor Orbán, now the Prime Minister of Hungary. But Orbán lost the general election, and Fidesz began to seem ineffective and mainstream. Szegedi travelled with friends to Austria to hear Jörg Haider, the leader of the far-right Austrian Freedom Party. “He was elegant, well dressed,” Szegedi said. “He was quite radical, but it wasn’t that old-fashioned right radicalism. It was something new. . . . He was using rap songs—he knows the language of young people.” When Jobbik was founded, its young leaders resolved to do the same.

As Jobbik became more successful, rivalries inside the party grew. In Borsod County, the electoral district that includes Miskolc, Szegedi and his brother, Márton, also a Jobbik leader, came into conflict with several people who were jealous of their rapid political rise. Among them was Zsolt Endrészik, who became president of Jobbik’s Borsod County branch in 2011, and a friend of his, Zoltán Ambrus, who had a farm near Miskolc, and liked to invite friends to come target shooting. Some of these friends were Jobbik members, while others were even more extreme. In the fall of 2009, an acquaintance of Ambrus’s was arrested on suspicion of murdering local Roma. Police searched the farm, found illegal weapons, and arrested Ambrus. He appealed to his friends in Jobbik, but the Szegedi brothers urged the Party’s central leadership not to get involved.

Ambrus was imprisoned, and after his release he nursed a grudge against Szegedi. Not long afterward, Szegedi’s grandmother’s birth certificate somehow fell into Ambrus’s hands. No one seems able to say where it came from. Szegedi speaks vaguely about “private detectives.” Hungarian journalists who covered the story are certain that it came from the old secret services, which in post-Communist Hungary have been tamed but not abolished. Endrészik had in fact approached some of those journalists—and some of Jobbik’s leaders, too—and hinted that he had some explosive material about the Szegedi brothers, but he didn’t get the reaction he wanted. Whatever the case, in the summer of 2010 Ambrus lured Szegedi to his farm and told him that he had documents proving that Szegedi had Jewish origins. He didn’t produce them, but, as Szegedi learned later, the conversation was taped.

Szegedi says he thought that Ambrus was lying—rumors about Jobbik members had long been floating around the Internet, along with fake “bar mitzvah certificates” and the like. So he acted as if nothing had happened: he went on telling anti-Semitic jokes, running the Turul shop, and making outrageous speeches, including the one at the flag-burning rally.

Still, Szegedi told some of his colleagues about Ambrus’s statements, and he was sufficiently disturbed to seek out some more information. When he next saw his grandmother—he says it was Christmas of 2011—he asked about her childhood. “It was a very long conversation,” he said. It turned out that she had been brought up by stepparents, and that they “were deported, and that they were Jewish. I calmed down, because it’s only the stepparents—they are not blood relations of mine.”

Szegedi was relieved by this clarification, but he still felt some discomfort—that something wasn't right. The following Easter, he returned to the topic and asked his grandmother again about her past. This time, she explained more fully. "She told me about her stepfather—and she told me that her stepfather was her uncle, who adopted her after her mother's death."

Now he understood that he really was Jewish. "What happened to you during the war?" he asked. She told him then that she had been deported to Auschwitz and survived. Her husband had been sent to a labor camp. All of her close relatives had been murdered, including her stepparents. She had seen terrible things, had been starved and beaten, and had barely escaped the gas chamber.

Szegedi was shocked by this story, but his first reaction was not repentance. Instead, he met his friend Gábor Szabó, the Jobbik politician with whom he co-owned the Turul shop. Szabó immediately grasped the importance of the news, not least because, he says, Szegedi burst into tears. "Szabó said, 'If she was deported, why is she still alive?' I said, 'Well, she survived.' And Szabó said, 'Let's keep it quiet,' " or words to that effect. Szegedi's parents, members of an older generation, had thought that Judaism was a thing you could discard. But, to Jobbik's extreme-right constituency, even someone who is one-twentieth Jewish is a "foreign element." Szegedi explains, "Anti-Semites believe that even if your grandfather's grandfather was Jewish then you are, too."

Such news could not be kept secret for long, and in June, 2012, just as the Borsod County elections were taking place—Szegedi won—a far-right Web site published the birth certificates of Szegedi's grandparents. Comments came pouring into kuruc.info. The revelation about Szegedi's origins reinforced every stereotype about hidden Jewish influence. "This is a typical Jewish strategy to be a part of a movement without telling anyone who you really are, and to destroy it from the inside," one commenter wrote. "They are everywhere, they are under our skin."

A few anonymous comments were supportive. Even if Szegedi is Jewish, one said, "he did a lot for us. . . . He acts like a real Christian." But no one asked whether a man who had grown up without the knowledge that his mother was Jewish, and who had devoted his life to an anti-Semitic, far-right political party, could be called "Jewish" at all.

The Party leadership convened a meeting, at which Szegedi was present. Vona argued that Szegedi should stay in the Party and act as a "laser shield": if he remained, Jobbik could no longer be accused of anti-Semitism. Novák disagreed. "If we had known he was Jewish," he wrote in an e-mail that was later circulated to the Jobbik leadership, "we would never have let him become vice-president." Accusing Szegedi of creating a "spiral of lies," he called for his resignation.

No decision was reached. But, as Szegedi left the meeting, one of the other Jobbik leaders, who had been a close friend, turned to him and said, "The best thing that could happen now is for someone to shoot you in the head, and for you to be reborn as an eighteen-year-old without any Jewish origins."

For a few days, Szegedi continued to argue that nothing had changed. He gave an interview to *Barikád* implying that Jobbik's enemies had leaked his grandmother's birth certificate in order to damage the movement: "The government used the intelligence services to smash Jobbik, because Jobbik is the spearhead of the nation." But his former friend's phrase—"the best thing that could happen now is for someone to shoot you in the head"—stayed with him. "This meant that everything I've ever done for Jobbik doesn't really matter, because I'm Jewish," he told me.



#“Hey, would you mind taking a quick sculpture of me and my family?”

Another truth hit him equally hard. His grandmother had never seen the film “Schindler’s List,” or read Elie Wiesel’s “Night,” yet she had described Auschwitz just as the history books did: the crematoriums, the starvation, the systematic and industrial murder of the Jews. Stories about the Holocaust couldn’t just be Communist propaganda, he realized: they were true.

Although the Party leadership was toying with the idea of keeping Szegedi on as a “laser shield,” his local rivals could not tolerate that. A few days later, in July, someone leaked the recording of the 2010 conversation between him and Ambrus. On the tape, Szegedi seems to be offering Ambrus European Parliament money.

Gyöngyösi, Jobbik’s spokesman, said that this was the last straw: Szegedi had to go. Not on account of his Judaism, Gyöngyösi was careful to explain, but because bribery—especially with money from the E.U.—is unacceptable to Jobbik. Szegedi disputes that statement. He said that the tape was doctored to make it sound as if he were offering a bribe. And besides, he argues, if no one in Jobbik was supposed to take E.U. money, then why didn’t anyone mind when Novák did? After that, according to Szegedi, he resigned. Jobbik’s leaders, who continue to claim that they had no problem with his being Jewish, say that he was fired.

Because Szegedi's story has a number of mysterious components—a secret birth certificate, a secret tape, a secret parliamentary slush fund, the possible involvement of the secret police—it continues to cause controversy. Novák now believes that Szegedi was lying the whole time about his Jewish background. After all, Novák said, “he was the one who paid so much attention to his origins. In the book he published”—his political autobiography—“he writes in great detail about his father's ancestors. At the same time, he forgets that on the maternal branch he has Jewish origins.” Others suspect that, even if he grew up without knowing his grandmother's story, he learned that she was Jewish long before 2012. Still others wonder whether the whole thing was a plot by the Socialists, or Fidesz, or the Hungarian police to damage Jobbik, or a plot by someone inside Jobbik to get rid of Szegedi.

Ironically, the only verifiable, fully documented part of Szegedi's story is the one that seems the most incredible: his conversion to Orthodox Judaism. After making contact with Köves, Szegedi took the far-right bumper stickers off his car. He threw out old posters and books. He sold the Turul shop. He became a regular at Köves's Shabbat services, and he now brings his wife and children, too.

On Köves's advice, Szegedi stayed in the European Parliament—as the rabbi put it, “Why should he give up his seat so that some Fascist can have it?”—although his colleagues no longer speak to him. Although he will not stand in the European elections of 2014, he gave a pro-Israel speech at the parliament in Brussels. He has also travelled to Israel—where, he said, he felt “close to God.”

Having lost so many friends, Party colleagues, and business connections, Szegedi has a lot more free time than he used to. Sometimes he reflects on the past and tries to understand how it was that he came to believe the things he believed: “When you are in politics, you cannot see yourself clearly from the outside. You tend to repress the feelings and also the facts that prove you are wrong.”

Szegedi is still proud of the campaign to put Old Hungarian runes on street signs, and he is glad that he tried to help Hungarians living outside the country's borders. But he knows that he got some things very, very wrong. “The most painful thing to me is the phrase ‘Gypsy crime’ and the anti-Gypsy policy. I feel very bad about it, because it created so much trauma for innocent Gypsies who had nothing to do with crimes that some other Gypsies committed. But they suffered for it.”

Szegedi is unclear about the future. He has thought about forming a civic movement, one that might help others through the process he went through. “I feel I have a duty to do it from the other side,” he told me. But he isn't sure that he wants to play any political role at all.

This may be wise: it's not clear if many Hungarians would welcome Szegedi's return to the public debate. Even now, kuruc.info makes fun of him with cartoons and mock headlines—“Szegedi celebrates his first Hanukkah!”—while Hungarian intellectuals on both the left and the center-right keep their distance. The philosopher Gáspár Miklós Tamás argues that Szegedi's conversion to Orthodox Judaism proves that he still thinks like a “racialist,” that he's a man who went from one extreme to another: “He thought, Oh, I'm Jewish, I must change all my convictions!”

Lately, Jobbik, suffering from internal divisions, has been struggling in the polls. Since it now plays a role in the parliament, some of its language has become more centrist, and some of its more radical supporters are disillusioned. Fidesz has tried to seize some of Jobbik's terrain, grappling more openly with the conflict between Roma and Hungarians, and also using more nationalist

rhetoric; Orbán has even made reference to the Turul bird. The last thing Jobbik wants is the emergence of a sharp critic, especially a former insider who could expose the Party's obfuscation of its leadership's racist and anti-Semitic views. Szegedi's old party isn't going to make it easy for him to return to public life, either.

If Szegedi's family has a view about what he should do next, he isn't letting on. He won't speak about his parents, except to say that his father at first "didn't understand" his decisions, and that his mother "still hasn't processed" the fact that she is Jewish. He allows that there were some difficult family dinners after his resignation from Jobbik, though he says that lately things have improved. Szegedi's brother, Márton, who also resigned from Jobbik, hasn't followed him into Chabad Lubavitch, and his wife, Szegedi says firmly, "is interested in me, not in politics." She wasn't fond of his Jobbik friends anyway. By all accounts, she seems happy enough to go to synagogue, though she doesn't yet have much to say when she's there. She does not want to play any public role, stays away from the political figures Szegedi once knew so well, and does not want to be interviewed at all.

As for Szegedi's grandmother, she still warns him away from Jewish traditions. Like many Holocaust survivors, she retains a certain paranoia, a fear that violence will return. According to Szegedi, she sometimes says, "There will be a new Holocaust." But he thinks that some Jewish traditions bring her joy. A few months ago, Szegedi and his brother took her to see her mother's grave, in a Jewish cemetery. She searched her apartment first for an old prayer book, which she'd kept hidden for many decades. She wept when she read from it at the cemetery. A member of Szegedi's synagogue congregation told me that, after hearing of this experience with his grandmother, many in the community who were initially skeptical have become convinced that he is sincere.

Szegedi is also trying to erase his past in a more tangible way, by trying to track down and destroy every copy of his book: he doesn't want his "negative thoughts" to be available to other people. I told him that I hadn't been able to find a copy myself, even from used-book dealers. "Good," he said. Not long ago, he put a pile of the books in a garbage bin behind his house. As he turned away, he noticed a garbage man pick one up and put it in his pocket. He was filled with a peculiar mixture of pride and horror. "He must have been a real fan of the old me," he said. "A fan of the old Csanád Szegedi."