

A whole new Jew

Csanád Szegedi was a far-right politician, who trivialized the Holocaust and blamed Jews for the wrongs of the world – before finding out that he was one himself **By Tibor Krausz, Budapest**

WHAT IF, Csanád Szegedi wants to know, pondering the subtleties of *halacha*, a Jewish man gets circumcised only as an adult and, being under anesthesia during the procedure, can't recite the requisite blessing? Is his circumcision still halachically valid?

And what if, he inquires next, exhibiting restless curiosity, the surgeon isn't Jewish? Oh, and can an uncircumcised Jew be called up to the Torah in shul?

Szegedi, 34, a former Member of the European Parliament for Hungary's far-right Jobbik party, is sitting in the study of Rabbi Baruch Oberlander, a Lubavitcher Hasid who is head of the ultra-Orthodox Chabad movement's Jewish outreach mission in Budapest. The two are flanked by towering bookshelves packed wall to wall, in a spacious, parquet-floored apartment boasting fifteen-foot high ceilings, with countless leatherbound tomes of rabbinical exegesis and Talmudic scholarship. Hasidic sages of yore gaze solemnly at them from sepia portraits on the wall. Behind them, a large window opens onto Budapest's famed Dohány Street Synagogue, which looms just a few meters away next door.

Every Friday morning, Szegedi, an erstwhile anti-Semite who discovered he was a Jew by descent in 2012, comes to study with Oberlander to learn about Jews and Judaism for an hour or two. In an atmosphere of casual bonhomie, the rabbi and his pupil shoot the breeze, discussing this and that but never straying far from matters of Jewish interest: Moses, Abraham, the Torah, Zionism, life in Israel.

Today, they start off with Shabbat prohibitions pertaining to hospital visits, apropos a

visit Szegedi made to an ailing friend. Then it's on to the topic of *brit mila*, a subject that likewise interests Szegedi who himself underwent the procedure only recently. They proceed to touch on bits and pieces from the Zohar, the Jewish legal code Shulchan Aruch, and Maimonides' "Guide for the Perplexed."

In between, they banter jovially.

"It's like an addiction with you, collecting books," Szegedi chides Oberlander, 51, a slight, bookish man with the studious mien of a lifelong bibliophile. "I remember going to a bookstore with you in Jerusalem," Szegedi elucidates. "You were like a naughty child who wanted everything that took his fancy!" Their laughter bounces off the book-lined walls.

I'd never thought the Holocaust was a national tragedy. I saw it as a distorted and falsified version of history

As radical transformations go, Szegedi's has been one for the storybooks. Here he is, fraternizing with an ultra-Orthodox rabbi, versing himself in the ins and outs of Jewish law, and toying with the idea of moving to Israel, a country he's visited repeatedly. Yet, only a few years ago, the very same man despised Jews, viewing them as a sinister cabal of scheming spoilers, congenital malefactors and cosmopolitan fifth-columnists who stood

in the way of Hungary's rightful aspirations as a proud and prosperous Christian nation at the heart of Europe.

Szegedi's wild-eyed notions of Jews were in line with the nativist platform that has formed the backbone of Jobbik's populist appeal in the Central European nation – a platform he did much to formulate and disseminate for a decade as one of the prominent nationalist party's most visible and outspoken leaders.

"I saw Jews as a monolithic group," Szegedi tells *The Jerusalem Report*. "When I thought of a Jew, I thought of a greedy, hunchbacked, hook-nosed banker."

In a country where anti-Semitism is rife, many others have seen Jews as such caricatures straight out of lurid anti-Semitic phantasmagorias. Jobbik (The Movement for a Better Hungary), which Szegedi helped found as a right-wing Christian youth movement in 2002 while still a college student, has sought to tap into such latent hatreds through a potent brew of nativism and scapegoating.

During his service to the causes of irredentism and chauvinism, Szegedi routinely played on such base instincts among disgruntled Hungarians by harping on the notion of Magyar victimhood at the hands of sinister foreign influences. A charismatic politician and gifted orator who stood at 6'2" and sported winsome features with a trim goatee, he did so ad nauseam during full-throated tirades at the party's mass rallies; in the country's parliament where he became a member for Jobbik at age 26 in 2008; and on television chat shows. He blamed the Jews for whatever he thought was wrong with the world – the tyranny of communism in



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Former far-right politician Csanád Szegedi at prayer with Rabbi Baruch Oberlander, head of Chabad's mission in Budapest

the past, the excesses of Western capitalism, the supranational mandate of the European Union, the machinations of Israel.

“Over the past 20 years,” he fulminated in one televised diatribe, “they [the Jews] have desecrated our Holy Crown, they have ridiculed the [medieval Catholic relic] Holy Right Hand.” He ploughed on, talking over a visibly discomfited talk show host, “Don’t tell me you don’t know that a Jewish rabbi insulted us by belittling our national heritage.” And this despite the fact, he added, warming to his theme, that “all Jewry has ever given humanity was a dusty stone tablet.” (He meant the Ten Commandments.)

NOR DID Szegedi have much patience for Jewish suffering and collective memory. “I have to listen to the Jews whining about the Holocaust day after day as if it had been my fault,” he recalls insisting to anyone who cared to listen. “OK, some Jews were killed in the war. So what? Many other people were killed, too.” In other words, he didn’t deny the Holocaust outright (at least in public), as many members of Jobbik did and still do; he just could not care less about it.

“The more I got immersed in Jobbik, the more I came to despise Jews and Gypsies,” Szegedi recalls. A personable man with an alert intelligence, he discusses his extremist past with refreshing candor. “We started out as a conservative youth movement, but by 2006 we began to hew fully to the far-right,” the erstwhile Hungarian nationalist explains. “We wanted to fill in an ideological vacuum by representing an increasingly radicalized group of Hungarians who wanted to find scapegoats for the country’s troubles. We saw it was working.”

Before long, he and his fellow Jobbik leaders decided to “let the ghost out of the bottle” and openly embrace an ideological territory that had hitherto been occupied only by skinheads and neo-Nazis. In August 2007, Szegedi, by now a full-blown Hungarian nationalist with staunchly irredentist, nativist and anti-Semitic views, helped found the Hungarian Guard, a quasi-fascist paramilitary wing for his Jobbik party. The Guard’s ideology (revanchism aimed at reclaiming Magyar lands lost to neighbors in World War I), insignias (the heraldry of Hungary’s founding dynasty) and uniforms (black tunics with matching

black caps) were all modelled purposefully on those of the Arrow Cross Party, a wartime fascist movement that played a pivotal role in the murder of 600,000 Hungarian Jews in 1944 during its short reign of terror.

The Guard was disbanded two years later by a Hungarian court for violating the rights of minorities. Undaunted, self-styled guardsmen who pledged to “protect a defenseless Hungary” continued to stage meetings and rallies unofficially. “We always tried to push the boundaries,” Szegedi recalls. “We played a double game. We imitated the wartime fascists” – to send clear signals to members of the extremist right in the country – “but we also insisted publicly that we were just Hungarian patriots.”

Such purposeful misdirection has been part of Jobbik’s modus operandi ever since. The party, which is the country’s third largest with a fifth of the votes and runs on a platform of ethnic exclusivism with slogans like “Only the Nation!” and “Hungary is for Hungarians,” continues to stoke virulent anti-Jewish animus in the country, but it regularly does so under a pretense of plausible deniability by referring to Jews obliquely with code words like “cosmopolitans,” “foreign interests” and “alien influences.” In the same vein, Gábor Vona, 38, the party’s photogenic leader and Szegedi’s former friend, has tried to rebrand himself as a loving soul by posing for campaign posters with cute puppies and kittens.

Jobbik has been decidedly pro-Palestinian – not out of love for Palestinian Arabs, but out of spite at Israelis. That, though, was contrary to Szegedi’s wishes. When the party’s leaders, himself included, sat down to decide what official stance to adopt on the Middle East conflict, he counselled a pro-Israel stance, in vain.

“That wasn’t because I liked Israel,” he says. “It was because I was worried that if anything happened to it, all those Israeli Jews would become refugees and start flooding into Hungary,” he confesses, laughing. “But I wasn’t a raving skinhead fanatic,” he adds. “I tried to approach the issue of Jews intellectually.”

As the extremist party’s mass appeal grew, so did Szegedi’s star rise.

In 2009, a year after he had become a member of Hungary’s parliament (“one of the happiest days of my life”), he became a



member of the European Parliament in Strasbourg, France, where he showed up wearing the Hungarian National Guard’s black peasant-style tunic, much to the puzzlement of other MPs, some of whom took him at first to be a janitor. By then, he had also established himself as a leading proponent of Turanism, a quasi-mystical concept of Hungarian nationhood with strong ethnic nationalist overtones. He did so in part by peddling ultra-nationalist wear and kitschy knick-knacks with far-right symbols at a shop he owned. He also formed a media company with Vona to publish Jobbik propaganda, including Bar!kád (Barricade), a bombastic newsweekly with plenty of anti-Jewish and anti-Gypsy innuendo.

The following year, his party finished third in national elections, earning itself more than 855,000 popular votes (in a country of less than 10 million) and 47 seats in the country’s



FERENC ISZA / AFP

Szegegi in his days as a Member of the European Parliament for the far-right Jobbik party speaks at a rally against the European Union in 2012; the banner in the background reads ‘Shall we be members or shall we be free’

386-seat parliament. Szegegi was on a roll as an increasingly popular (and notorious) far-right firebrand.

Then, in 2012, came the proverbial twist in the tale: the Hungarian nationalist who feared and despised Jews turned out to be a feared and despised Jew himself.

A disgruntled acquaintance with neo-Nazi sympathies who had been nursing a grudge against Szegegi confronted the Jobbik politician with a damning bit of news: Szegegi’s elderly maternal grandmother, née Magdolna

Klein, was Jewish – and hence so was Szegegi himself, according to Jewish law. Not only that, but she was a survivor of Auschwitz with a concentration camp identification number tattooed on a forearm to prove it.

Szegegi says he was, at first, incredulous. “My grandmother is blonde and blue-eyed. How could she be Jewish?” he remembers thinking. “Then I looked in the mirror,” he goes on, “and I thought, ‘This is not what a Jew looks like.’”

But his accuser insisted that he had irrefutable proof: he had somehow obtained a copy of the birth certificate of Szegegi’s grandmother, which listed her as a Jew. Szegegi was nonplussed. His grandmother, whom he had assumed to be an ethnic Magyar and a good Christian, had never let on about her Jewish heritage, much less her wartime experiences in a Nazi concentration camp.

Yet, when he quizzed her, she confirmed his fears. She was indeed born a Jew and was deported to Auschwitz in 1944, along with hundreds of thousands of other Hungarian Jews. She had chosen to keep quiet about it – she explained in a chat with her grandson, which the latter recorded on video for posterity – in case Hungarians might one day decide to come again for Jews like her living within their midst. She always wore shirts with long sleeves to hide her Auschwitz tattoo. “She didn’t want to be Jewish anymore,” Szegegi says. “My mother knew, but she felt the same so she didn’t tell me and my brother.”

SZEGEDI ALSO learned that his late grandfather, whom his grandmother married after the war, was Jewish, too. He was chain-ganged into a Jewish labor battalion in 1942 and barely survived. By the war’s end, the once tall and well-built man, who was suffering from typhus, had turned into a living skeleton. His first wife had by then perished in Auschwitz, along with his two young children.

Suddenly, the Holocaust, until now someone else’s tragedy, of which he had been contemptuous, became all too personal for Szegegi.

“It all felt like I had been stabbed in the heart,” he recalls. “I’d never thought the Holocaust was a national tragedy [for Hungary],” he explains. “I saw it as a distorted and

falsified version of history,” which the Jews exploited to foist a sense of national shame and collective guilt onto Hungarians.

But now he realized that members of his own family had been victims of it. “I took it badly,” he says. “I had two young children of my own. I sank into a severe depression.”

At first, Szegegi tried to hush up the matter of his Jewish ancestry, allegedly even trying to bribe his accuser into silence – a charge he denies. Before long, however, the contents of his Jewish grandmother’s birth certificate became public knowledge after a right-wing website posted it online.

The populist politician’s carefully crafted self-image as an “authentic” Magyar with impeccable ethnic credentials began to unravel in the full glare of publicity. His friends in Jobbik turned on him, accusing him of being a saboteur and agent provocateur who had infiltrated their ranks knowingly as part of a clandestine Jewish plot to destroy the party from within. At one point, after he delivered a pro-Israel speech in the European Parliament while still nominally a Jobbik politician, scores of skinheads and Jobbik stalwarts showed up outside his house in Budapest calling for his head and chanting “Death to Jews!”

His political career was over.

“I was experiencing a crisis of identity with my career in ruins, my convictions shattered,” Szegegi recalls. “I realized I’d been living a lie. I was feeling physically ill.” He felt as if, by having been outed as Jewish, he had been diagnosed with a terminal illness – a new identity that was like a death sentence in his social and political circles. “I became the last thing I’d ever wanted to be,” he says. “But if you fear something you have to face that fear, and I dreaded being Jewish.”

To “sort my head out,” he decided to turn to the source of all his troubles: the Jews. He found the contact details of a Chabad rabbi in Budapest – a bearded, black-hatted man whom he regarded as the most obvious manifestation of a Jew. By then, the juicy story of a right-wing anti-Semite who learns he is Jewish had become international news, which made him feel even more like a pariah and a laughingstock. “I wanted to hide, but I became a center of attention,” he notes.

After agonizing over the matter for a few

days, Oberlander agreed to see Szegedi. “He was a broken person. I’d never met someone so lost,” the rabbi recalls. “His whole identity, his whole being had been shattered to pieces. Imagine spending your life denigrating a family, then having to learn that you’re a member of that same family,” he explains. “Csanád was a man who needed help and I couldn’t turn him away.”

OBERLANDER, THE American-born son of Hungarian Holocaust survivors, told Szegedi about Jews and Judaism, and invited him to his Orthodox synagogue in downtown Budapest. “It wasn’t a popular decision,” the rabbi says. “Many people weren’t happy. Some of them walked out in protest when Csanád entered.”

Szegedi wasn’t all that happy being there, either. He felt like a cornered animal with nowhere to hide. “When I put the kippa on my head for the first time, I felt it was burning into my scalp,” he says, somewhat melodramatically. “It was giving me a headache.”

Yet, he persisted. Perhaps subconsciously, having been ostracized in one tightly knit social circle, he was now seeking to anchor himself in another so as to avail himself of the comforting certainties of a newfound identity that he had not wanted but now began to embrace just the same. His detractors, who included both Jews and right-wing nationalists, accused him of trying to pull off a brazen publicity stunt to save his political career by conspicuously metamorphosing from loudmouth anti-Semite into repentant Jew.

Oberlander, too, was initially skeptical of Szegedi’s sincerity. “I prayed I’d made the right decision by helping him,” the Lubavitcher says. “I prayed he wouldn’t disappoint me.”

So far, he hasn’t. In 2013, Szegedi had his bar mitzvah in the company of several ultra-Orthodox rabbis at Oberlander’s residence. The erstwhile anti-Semite chose the Jewish name Dovid for himself, and soon he also had his *brit mila*, at the hands of an ultra-Orthodox *mohel*. “I felt elated,” Szegedi says. “I was the first person in my family to have had it since my grandfather, who was born in 1902.”

He began to keep Shabbat and kosher – albeit both after a fashion. On the side, he repaired his great-grandmother’s tomb, which

had languished forgotten and neglected in a Jewish cemetery.

“There’s a concept in Judaism called *teshuvah* [repentance],” Oberlander explains. “There’s no question that Csanád has a real interest in making amends and becoming a better person.”

During a visit to Auschwitz, where he travelled to see the death camp for himself, Szegedi realized that the site where the crematoria had once stood was the closest he would ever get to a proper resting place for his grandfather’s two murdered children, who were around the same age when they were gassed as his own two sons, five and eight, are today. He also realized that the horrific stories about the death camp, which he had previously dismissed as tall tales, were, in fact, true.

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Next, he flew to Israel, where he says he was overwhelmed by the can-do spirit of Israelis.

“They’ve built a country from scratch!” he enthuses. “You ride down this busy eight-lane highway in a place where until recently there was nothing but sand. In Hungary, you have to wait years for a new road to be built, and it’s usually a measly little two-lane thing.”

Szegedi’s wife, who isn’t Jewish, has been fully supportive and is in the process of converting to Judaism. The couple is considering

making aliyah with their two children.

His father, though, took rather more convincing to accept his son’s embrace of his Jewish roots. A well-known artisan and woodcarver, Miklós Szegedi comes from a long line of ethnic Magyars and inculcated his dislike of Jews into his two sons from an early age. “My father was... how should we put it?... skeptical of Jews,” his son explains.

To allay his father’s misgivings, Csanád decided to take Miklós on a visit to Israel, a country that Szegedi père had never fancied much. On the plane, Csanád put on his kippa and turned to his father, teasing his old man, “Dad, from now on please call me Dovid. And did I tell you I’ve had my circumcision?” Szegedi chuckles at the memory. “My father found it hard to come to terms with [the new me],” he says. “He felt he had lost his son.”

The older Szegedi has since reconciled himself to his son’s newly minted identity, yet theirs is hardly the only family in Hungary that has found itself discovering Jewish skeletons in their ostensibly “pure” Magyar closets. “This Csanád case is like a caricature of a common Hungarian story – the parents not telling their kids they’re Jews and the kids not knowing they’re Jewish until they somehow find out,” Oberlander notes. “I have people calling me regularly, saying ‘Rabbi, I’m Jewish. What should I do?’”

As if on cue, his phone rings. At the other end of the call is a man who has just learned he is Jewish on his father’s side and wants to know what he should do. “See, just like I said!” Oberlander chortles.

As for Szegedi, he insists he has no regrets. Sure, he’s never going to make it in right-wing politics as he once hoped, but he’s had a new world open up to him.

“As a far-right politician I used to see the world in black and white,” he explains. “Now, I can see the colors. When you discover you’re Jewish, you discover a whole new world – Jewish religion, Jewish literature, Jewish culture...”

On the downside, he’s also discovered that he stands no chance of joining the global Jewish conspiracy he once believed lent Jews immense financial and political power.

“I am sorrowfully experiencing that I was wrong and Jews don’t, in fact, control the world,” Szegedi says and laughs. ■