

How a hidden past changed an anti-Semitic leader into a Jewish seeker

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Csanád Szegedi remembers looking in the mirror when he learned that his grandparents on his mother's side were Jewish.

"This is not the way a Jew looks," he thought to himself.

The image he saw reflected back was of a burly, goateed leader of Jobbik, the far-right party of Hungary. Three years ago, Szegedi was a man who kept a copy of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* on his bookshelf, who felt anger when he saw a man with a yarmulke walking down the street. Though never a skinhead or typical neo-Nazi, he said, he certainly sounded like one on the podium, blaming Jews for "buying up" Hungary and infiltrating Europe.

Those words, which once came so easily to him, ceased when he learned that his grandmother was a Holocaust survivor—lineage he first tried to repress and deny—even, allegedly, by paying bribes. But when the revelation, which came from a Jobbik rival, could no longer be covered up, he realized his political career was over, and with it his purpose and sense of self.

"I had a high opinion of myself and didn't have a high opinion of the Jews, and I had to reconcile that somehow," he said. "And my grandmother, and grandfather, and mother, they are all Jewish and they are all good people. ... To change your mind about something, it's probably one of the hardest things to face in life."

He was only able to move forward when he took the highly publicized step of converting to Judaism, and in the last year, found a new purpose and challenge. He deals now with having left behind his hard-line rhetoric—and the communities that embraced it—even as he confronts skepticism from those who doubt his sincerity. The man who said he effortlessly addressed thousands now talks to a couple of hundred schoolchildren once a week, to rail against the anti-Semitism around them. He calls it one of the toughest things he's ever done.

The task—and his transformation, although not uncontested—comes at a critical time in Hungary. The very party he helped to found as a university student studying history in Budapest in 2003 is moving mainstream. Second now only to the right-wing Fidesz party, Jobbik reached a major milestone this month when they won a constituency seat in a by-election in the western town of Tapolca, for the first time in the party's history.

While Jobbik denies that it is anti-Semitic, Jewish people and other minorities across the country, especially the Roma who have been the party's main *bête noire*, have worried about its mainstream surge. "Jobbik is everywhere," said Borbala Kriza, a sociologist in Budapest who studies the far right.

Finding his roots

Szegedi, a 32 year old with rosy cheeks in a crisp purple pinstriped shirt, might have been riding that success. Instead he has just finished on a recent day a two-hour class with a rabbi in the heart of the Jewish district of Budapest, as he does every Friday with his wife. On this day the three have discussed the meaning of the Jewish holiday Shavuot, which occurs seven weeks after Passover.

Szegedi was a rising star when a rival inside the party revealed Szegedi's family history. Being Jewish was a claim that seemed so outrageous to him, he said, that he could have just as easily been called a drug trafficker or wife beater. And yet something kept him from simply asking his family for the answer.

"I didn't have the guts to ask them," he said. "Somehow I was scared. What if they said something I didn't want to hear?"

Once he did find the courage to ask, he learned that his grandmother had a tattoo from Auschwitz that she covered for his entire life. She didn't visit her own mother in the local Jewish cemetery for 50 years so that her secret wouldn't be betrayed.

He said that the scandal brought his grandmother, who has since died, the relief of truth. But the rest of the family was paralyzed, including his brother, who had also belonged to Jobbik and left, but Szegedi was too confused himself to provide solace.

"There was a day when I clearly thought I was going to go nuts," Szegedi said. "I felt that somehow I didn't have any air around me."

And that's how he ended up in the book-lined study of Boruch Oberlander, the head of the Budapest Orthodox Rabbinical Council, each Friday afternoon.

The process has been daunting and draining for both sides. "The one thing I made very clear to him is that there is nothing he can't ask," Oberlander said. So when Szegedi has challenged him, saying he must "hate the Arabs," the rabbi has said: "Listen, you don't hate the person. ... Believe me, the people of Israel don't hate the Arabs. They hate war, they hate terrorism, they hate to see people die. But they don't hate the Arabs."

Some members of his synagogue were deeply skeptical about Szegedi's motives—and some still are. But Oberlander told them that it is not his job as a rabbi to forgive, he simply had to follow Jewish law.

He said: "Some have asked, what if tomorrow he becomes an anti-Semite again? And I say, if it happens I'm going to be very disappointed, but I really hope and believe that it's not going to happen. It hasn't happened yet. ... I believe most people, if they didn't completely agree with my decision, they got used to it and understand where I'm coming from."

Some 600,000 Hungarian Jews perished in the Holocaust. Thousands of survivors hid their religion from future generations to shield their children from hate and out of a fear of a return to darker days, said Oberlander, whose parents survived Auschwitz and who was born in Brooklyn. He came to Hungary to reverse the willing assimilation of Jews here.

"His experience isn't so rare in that sense," he said. "His experience is just a caricature of a thing that happens all the time."

Jewish life has since undergone a renaissance in Budapest, where the Jewish district is one of the most vibrant in the city and the city's Synagogue, one of the largest in Europe, is a major tourist attraction. Jewish residents say that despite worrying political rhetoric, they live a good and visible life.

But Jobbik's rise has caused concern. The party has attempted to scrub itself from the earlier rhetoric of men like Szegedi. The effort, not unlike that of other far-right parties in Europe like France's National Front, has been dubbed the "cute campaign" by the media here. On its English website's media page, Jobbik chastises journalists for being "lazy" and "happy to both intentionally mislead and deliberately libel the

cause of modern Hungarian patriotism.”

Márton Gyöngyösi, Jobbik’s head of the foreign affairs committee of the Hungarian National Assembly, said the party is not anti-Semitic, just anti-Zionist, which he knows is conflated in the media and among opposition members. “We are not going to give that up,” he said, but added, “I think we need to be more careful perhaps in the timing and how we communicate these matters.”

Gyöngyösi was harshly criticized in the international press for saying in 2012 that Jews in government should make their Jewishness known to the public if they pose a “national security risk.” He later apologized for what he called a misunderstanding.

So far analysts say the “cute campaign” has worked—the fact that Jobbik has spread across the country among all demographic sectors is proof that voters believe they have moved away from their extremist beginnings, Borbala said. Gyöngyösi is a clean-cut representative who speaks flawless English and makes a strong case for his party: one of the people, an anti-elite, anti-corrupt alternative to the ruling class.

As Jobbik has attempted to clean up its image, Oberlander isn’t sure such efforts amount to more than rhetoric—but he still sees it as progress.

“The idea that they feel that at least externally they have to change, I think it’s a positive sign,” he said. “I think it shows they realize if they want to become more mainstream, they cannot continue with the message of hate.”

'It takes time'

Szegedi, whose wife is in the process of converting and whose three- and six-year-old sons he hopes have Bar Mitzvahs someday, is perhaps more poised than anyone to weigh in on the possibilities of Jobbik’s conversion.

He is not hopeful. Even if they aren't overtly anti-Semitic, a 180-degree change would require the individual transformation of all the party leadership.

Judging from his own experience, it is one that is still riddled in questions. Suddenly part of a conservative brand of Judaism, Szegedi, who grew up without religion, doesn’t live a classic Orthodox life. He does not keep kosher—but then feels guilty about it. “Jewish guilt, we did something right,” joked the translator. The two men laughed heartily.

Today he's in the midst of a new challenge—as he has finally felt ready to talk to the public about the importance of tolerance and understanding. “People were asking, how come he hasn't done anything yet?” Oberlander said. “I said, ‘It takes time.’”

Szegedi has been charged over the years with pulling off a publicity stunt, but he insists that his new public role is not natural for him. “I never had a problem with public speaking,” he said. “But as a politician I didn't have to talk about myself.”

Even though he feels confidence in the credibility he brings to the work, each time he has to face his own turnaround.

“I try to believe whatever I did is the way it was supposed to be done at the time,” he said. “I don't regret it because if I wasn't who I was, I wouldn't be who I am now.”