

The impact of Hungarian anti-Semitism

Christopher Adam

Csanád Szegedi, a member of the European Parliament and a founder of the rabidly anti-Semitic Jobbik Movement for a Better Hungary – a far-right political party that last year suggested Hungarian Jews posed a national security risk and should be forced to register with authorities – never thought that he would one day be participating at an event hosted by Montreal's Westmount Chabad.

Since his election in 2009, Szegedi has regularly attended sessions of the European Parliament dressed in a black vest and adorned with a red-and-white striped crest worn by the disbanded Hungarian Guard, the far-right paramilitary wing of Jobbik. He brought to life terrifying memories for Hungarian Holocaust survivors, who recognized how similar this uniform was to those worn by Hungarian fascists during World War II.

As Szegedi discovered in 2012, one of those Holocaust survivors was his grandmother. She was tight-lipped about her family's past, but had Szegedi paid closer attention, he may have been able to decipher the tell-tale signs of his family's hidden past.

But I am hardly in a position to blame Szegedi for not having been able to put together the pieces of the puzzle. However incredible Szegedi's story of self-discovery may seem on this side of the Atlantic, it was not uncommon for Holocaust survivors to provide their children with the image of a clean, untroubled family past and to bury both their Jewish heritage and their horrific experience during World War II as deeply as possible.

I only discovered that my father, aunt and my grandmother were Holocaust survivors – and that my grandfather was killed in Mauthausen concentration camp – on a damp February afternoon earlier this year, as I was emptying out my late aunt's apartment in Montreal. My father, who died in 2004, was 12 years old when his father was deported. My father, grandmother, aunt and uncle were taken from their home in Budapest and were moved into one of the 2,000 “yellow star houses,” where Jews were forced to live between June and late November 1944, before being taken to the Budapest Ghetto. My father shared snippets – hardly more than blurry, abridged memories – of his experiences surviving the war as a child, but remained silent on his family's persecution during the Holocaust. His father, Béla Ádám, one of some 600,000 Hungarian Jews murdered during the Holocaust, had “died on the front” according to one story and had been executed in late 1944 for trying to desert, according to another.

While my paternal grandfather hailed from a generation of Budapest merchants, the official family history chronicled my grandmother's family as being patriotic Hungarian Protestants from Transylvania. My grandmother, Mária Borsai, was an

Csanád Szegedi invited to speak in Montreal

author of children's books, her father was a widely respected chief physician in the county and a philanthropist, supporting ethnic Hungarian authors and artists in Romanian-controlled Transylvania.

But with the death of my aunt early this year, the carefully crafted narrative created by three generations of my father's family unravelled at lightning speed. In an effort to assimilate, my great-grandfather changed his family name at the beginning of the 20th century and established a scholarship at the Unitarian secondary school in the town of Cluj. His children took the process of assimilation a step further and converted to Christianity, while my father's generation crossed the last ‘t’ after the trauma of the Holocaust by pledging never to speak of the family's past to their children, sparing them the heavy burden of persecution. One of my father's cousins tried to break the silence

in 1999, but met resistance. His letter revealing the family's deeply hidden secret was never shown to me.

Death sometimes has a way of baring all. It isn't always possible to take secrets to the grave. A generation of Hungarians arose from the shattered cities and communities in 1945 with a mindset that they would be building a new world, rather than preserving the painful memories of a previous one. And by forgetting, they believed that they were shielding their children from the visceral anti-Semitism of the likes of Szegedi, but also from the bias that they knew permeated Hungarian society.

Szegedi once noted that since discovering his Jewish heritage, he has gone from the persecutor to being the persecuted. Thousands of other Hungarians, including myself, grew up and lived their adult lives knowing

nothing about their family's Jewish roots and their parents' experience during the Holocaust.

Yet this lack of knowledge did not stop us, as it did in Szegedi's case, from having compassion for those who survived the horrors of the Shoah and for condemning all forms of anti-Semitism.

It seems to me that the test of human empathy is whether you are able to walk in solidarity with “the other.” Szegedi's former colleagues on the far right, as well as many supporters of Hungary's current, authoritarian government, find solidarity that crosses religious, cultural and ethnic boundaries wholly undesirable. Szegedi was once a firm proponent of this viewpoint, and it took an unexpected revelation to convince him to change direction. The difficult question that remains unanswered – and perhaps requires more reflection – is whether Szegedi will now find forgiveness.

Christopher Adam is a historian based in Ottawa and has taught European history at Carleton University.

No single solution to hatred

The winds of change are blowing for Jewish communities all over the world. A shocking poll released recently by a European Union agency found that 76 per cent of Jewish people polled believe there has been an increase in anti-Semitic hostility in their European home countries. Close to half of the poll's respondents (46 per cent) are afraid of being verbally attacked or harassed because they are Jewish, while more than 23 per cent said they had actually been discriminated against recently.

OPINION

Hate is a mutating illness that knows no borders and has no boundaries. Canada has not been immune to pernicious anti-Semitism and Israel defamation. For the last 13 years, we have been battling anti-Jewish hate on university campuses, at gay pride parades and on city streets, all the while seeing vicious propaganda and slander adopted by unions and church groups. Families and neighbourhoods that have been hit by anti-Semitism struggle with the age-old question – “Why us?”

The rise of anti-Semitism, whether by stealth as practised by university students, or the more overt methods employed by radical Hezbollah supporters, is real and must not be ignored or played down. This is particularly true of university



Avi Benlolo

campuses, where students and faculty alike have spearheaded the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement against Israel.

How we as the Jewish community of Canada engage with problems of anti-Semitism, defamation of Israel and the threat to democracy and human rights will ultimately define not only who we are today, but also our very future.

We are fortunate to be residing in one of the most dynamic and engaging communities in the world, with supportive federal and provincial governments. But with the seeds of hate being planted today, can we take our comfort for granted? The new proposed Quebec charter of values is an example of how the tide of religious freedom can easily turn. Although one Parti Québécois candidate has already

had her knuckles rapped for suggesting the removal of the word “Jewish” from the name of Montreal's Jewish General Hospital, it seems safe to say we can expect increasing incidents of anti-Jewish hate in Quebec if the charter becomes law.

As history shows, there is no single solution to anti-Semitism. Any suggestions to the contrary must be looked upon with suspicion. I support all community methods of advocacy, education and programming as a convergence of efforts to push back.

In my capacity as leader of a Canadian human rights advocacy organization my strategic approach has been to build a sphere of influence outside of the Jewish community. Most non-Jews are revolted by the sight of anti-Semitism and anti-Israel sentiment. By harnessing friendships with educators, police, governments, community and religious leaders, we can strengthen our efficacy. Projects such as Freedom Day, Tools for Tolerance, Compassion to Action, Speakers Idol, diversity workshops and now, the new Tour for Humanity mobile Tolerance Education Center, allow us to engage with the world.

Alone, we are a light unto the nations. Together, with friends who share our values, we become a beacon of light that can transform the entire universe.

Avi Benlolo is president and CEO of Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies.