

Christian Churches Back Jews Facing Anti-Semitism in Hungary

When Hungarian radical right-wingers rallied against a Jewish conference in Budapest in early May, a well-known Protestant pastor hid behind the stage while his wife stepped up to the podium to denounce Jews and Israel.

Lorant Hegedus could have preached the same anti-Semitism as his wife, a deputy for the populist Jobbik party in parliament. But his part in launching the rally may cost him his role as the far-right's favorite clergyman.

With anti-Semitism on the rise here, Christian churches are working with the Jewish community to counter the provocations against Jews and the Roma minority that have won Jobbik support among voters fed up with the country's economic crisis.

The Hungarian Reformed Church has begun proceedings that might end up defrocking Hegedus and depriving him of his high-profile base at the Homeland Church on the upscale Freedom Square, near the central bank and the United States embassy.

"This is a permanent provocation," Gusztav Bolcskei, the Church's presiding bishop, said of Hegedus's political activity. "It has nothing to do with the Gospel."

Hungary's small community of 80,000-100,000 Jews appreciates the Christian support. "We're satisfied with the actions of the churches," said Peter Feldmajer, who stepped down as head of the community on Sunday.

"I think, at the end of the day, he will be fired," he said. Hegedus declined to be interviewed for this article.

Religion in Politics

Anti-Semitism has deep roots in Hungary, which began passing anti-Jewish laws in 1920, more than a decade before Nazi Germany. About half a million Hungarian Jews died in the Holocaust, which the Christian churches failed to oppose.

Other trends that resonate with sections of Hungarian society are a tradition of vibrant nationalism after centuries of foreign domination and, more recently, a strong resentment against the country's largest minority, its 700,000 Roma.

With the country in economic crisis and voters disillusioned by the previous Socialist governments, Jobbik tapped these emotions to win 17 percent of the votes in the 2010 election.

While conservative Prime Minister Viktor Orban has condemned anti-Semitism and rapped Jobbik in recent comments to an Israeli newspaper, he shied away from denouncing the party in a May 5 speech to a World Jewish Congress assembly here only minutes after WJC President Ronald Lauder urged him to do so.

"If Orban goes too hard against Jobbik, he's worried he won't be able to scoop up Jobbik's voters," said Robin Shepherd, author of a study for the WJC on neo-Nazi parties in Europe.

Neutralized in public during the four decades of communism that ended in 1989, religion has crept back into Hungarian politics in recent years as Orban's Fidesz party stresses the country's Christian roots while Jobbik fans resentment of Jews.

This has come despite a dramatic fall in church affiliation. Census figures show that self-declared Roman Catholics dropped from 54 to 39 percent of the population between 2001 and 2011 and self-declared Reformed from 16 to 12 percent.

The Jewish community remained stable at 0.1 percent.

Difficult to Defrock

The resurgent mixture of nationalism and anti-Semitism has presented a challenge for the Reformed Church, which has a strong patriotic tradition rooted in opposition to the Catholic Habsburgs plus church laws allowing wide leeway to its pastors.

Its national leadership has denounced anti-Semitism several times but failed a decade ago to oust Hegedus, whose father was bishop of Budapest at the time. It renewed the effort to defrock him last month after he called for the anti-Jewish rally.

"According to our democratic rules, this should start at the church district level," Bolcskei said. If the district agrees to move against a pastor, the case then goes up the hierarchy and through church courts before a final decision.

"It can be done, but it's a very long procedure," he said.

Thanks to regular dialogue between Jews and Reformed Church leaders, Feldmayer said he understood why Bolcskei – who he said was "totally with us" – could not easily expel Hegedus.

He thought only about 10 percent of Reformed preachers and congregants harbored anti-Semitic views, a figure that matches pollsters' estimates of Jobbik's core political support, and hoped the Church leadership could change their minds.

Cardinal Criticised

"It's easier in the Catholic Church," said Feldmayer, who praised Cardinal Peter Erdo for his strong support for the Jewish community "not just in a closed room but also in public."

Jews used to feel some hostility from some Catholic clergy, he said, but that faded away after Erdo became archbishop of Budapest a decade ago, he said.

The Catholic bishops issued an open letter before the 2010

election warning against “neo-pagan tendencies” in some political parties, a clear reference to some Jobbik ideologues who hark back to Hungary’s pre-Christian history.

Erdo, who was frequently mentioned earlier this year as a possible successor to retired Pope Benedict, joined the 2012 Budapest March of the Living to remember the Holocaust.

“I’ve received some hostile letters and criticism in some newspapers saying that the Catholic Church is not patriotic enough,” the cardinal said. “There are also people who say Jesus Christ was not a Jew. Come on, this is crazy.”

(Editing by Anna Willard)

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