

Testimony of Tamás Fellegi

Before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on
Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations

Hearing on “Anti-Semitism: A Growing Threat to All Faiths”
February 27, 2013

Chairman Smith, Distinguished Members of the Hearing Committee,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a real honor for me to be invited to testify for and about Hungary. A country, where I was born and where as a Jew I feel at home. I cannot stress enough the importance of this hearing, which comes at a time when Hungary is going through major changes internally.

Preparing for this public hearing, I spoke to several prominent figures of Hungarian public life, including executives of Jewish organizations, religious leaders, intellectuals, university professors, government people and opposition figures, including the prime minister and the president of the Hungarian Socialist Party. However, what follows here represents my ideas and my evaluation of the current situation.

I would like to anchor my brief opening on three main tenets:

First, anti-Semitism has been on the rise in Hungary. This fact has complex reasons but at its core, the current phenomenon is an expression of frustration with Hungary’s imperfect democratic transition, and especially with the deep political, moral and economic crisis dominating Hungary since 2006.

Second, only Jobbik, a party with a ten percent base among the national population, is an openly anti-Semitic party. There is a clear line of demarcation between Jobbik, and the center-right government and all other mainstream political parties.

Third, despite all this, Jewish life, including religious life, has been enjoying a renaissance in Hungary that is welcome and encouraged by all mainstream parties.

Let me put these points into a historical perspective. Similarly to most of Europe, prejudice against Jews has always been present in Hungary, both open and latent. However, it is important to distinguish between deep-seated prejudices and anti-Semitic manifestations, and the use of anti-Semitism for political manipulation or to gain political advantages.

In Hungary, Jews lived, ever since the 13th century, under circumstances that were unparalleled in Medieval and early modern continental Europe. By the 19th century, the Hungarian Jewish community became one of the most numerous, successful, integrated and assimilated minorities in Europe, in all aspects of life: education, business, culture, and the arts. But this favorable and welcoming atmosphere changed for the worse following World War I. While Europe's Jews found refuge in Hungary fleeing from Nazism, the political elite, lead by Regent Miklos Horthy – who is still one of the most debated public figures of Hungary – eventually bowed to the pressure of Nazi Germany. Between 1920 and 1945, he oversaw the introduction of anti-Jewish legislation, and Hungary's involvement in the Second World War on the side of Nazi Germany. The Hungarian Holocaust, which happened with the active participation of the Hungarian political establishment, became a tragedy of our entire nation.

During the almost 45 years of Communist rule, any realistic chance to honestly face the legacy of the pre-war era and the Second World War was denied by the one-party rule. Anti-Semitism, however, was tangible in the infighting of the Communist elite. In society in general, anti-Jewish sentiments took the appearance of an anti-Israeli stance, especially after the 1967 Middle East war, when the open manifestation of anti-Semitism by the European Left was disguised as criticism of Israeli policies. Undoubtedly, we still carry on this legacy in Hungary and elsewhere in Europe.

The democratic changes of 1989-1990, the freedom of speech and of the media allowed open discussion about our twentieth century history and its legacy. Previously suppressed frustrations and open debates we never had before about our troubled past came to the surface. Thus, the same democratization itself made ever-present latent anti-Semitism manifest.

Several openly anti-Semitic political and civic organizations have surfaced, but they have never – and let me emphasize this point – never ended up in government.. Here, I have to mention the establishment of the openly anti-Semitic and anti-Roma party, Jobbik, which started out as a radical anti-establishment movement, revolting against the post-communist political elite, and has picked up its racist and anti-Semitic edge as a tool of political marketing, only to be immediately engulfed by it.

Today, the essence of Jobbik is a gut reaction against the status quo. It is a radical statement made against the EU, against the entire 'post-Communist' political establishment, against the unrealized economic security of the democratic transition, dressed up in racism. It is a catch-all party, giving everyone a little bit of something to hate and someone to blame.

After eight years of socialist-liberal government, which brought Hungary to the brink of economic collapse and essentially let the rural population of Hungary become a prey of

local gangs, Jobbik managed to get around 15 percent of the popular vote in 2010 to become the third largest party in Parliament. It has also cultivated an aggressive paramilitary arm, which was banned by the present government but keeps reinventing itself. Constitutionally-protected freedom of speech enables Jobbik to voice its openly racist views on websites and print magazines and even in the Hungarian Parliament. I personally believe that the most negative consequence of this has been the decline of public sensitivity to racism. Whether people dismiss the ideas of Jobbik or not – it is still there.

What is also there, however, is a rebirth of Jewish culture. Jewish life in Hungary started to blossom from day one of democracy. Thousands of families started to speak about their history, both as individuals and as a people. The Lubavich Community has a strong presence. An extremely popular summer camp for Jewish children in Szarvas brings together Jewish children from all across Hungary; there is a high school to complement to the Rabbinic Seminary, which, by the way, happened to be the only functioning one in any Communist country. A new synagogue will be built in Csepel for the first time in 80 years. The Main Synagogue in Dohány utca, which was for a long time the second largest synagogue in the world, has become a touristic and cultural hub. Budapest's formerly abandoned Jewish district is now the most lively part of downtown Pest. The Lauder Yavne School is one of the best educational institutions in the nation, and Hungary just opened the International Israeli Cultural Institute. The annual Jewish Summer Festival brings thousands from all across Europe; there are courses in Hebrew offered by language schools and there is a number of Jewish weeklies and periodicals which did not exist before. All historic Jewish groups are acknowledged and registered as religious institutions entitled to receive state support for the cultural contributions they make. These facts about the state of Jewish life in Hungary cannot be ignored.

In our newly born democracy, both anti-Semitism and pro-Jewish sentiments have become openly political. Political parties and civil organizations very quickly recognized how anti-Semitism could be used to gain political support and sympathy at home and abroad. Anti-Semitism has become a political card to be used.

Patterns of voting behavior and public opinion polls clearly indicate that, when it comes to anti-Semitism, there is a substantial overlap between the electorate of the Left and that of the far-right Jobbik Party. Does this mean that the political Left is racist or the center-right is devoid of prejudices? The answer to both questions is no. One should not really argue that certain writings by journalists associated with the center-right, such as the infamous commentaries of Zsolt Bayer, cannot be deemed as racist. It is also a fact that there are people associated with the center-right political community who support the rehabilitation of the historic period of Admiral Horthy. I am personally against his rehabilitation, and that applies to a wide range of political and literary figures of that era.

Let me briefly list the milestones that democratic Hungary has done as a nation since the collapse of Communism to reconcile with the Jewish community:

- Establishment of the Hungarian Jewish Heritage Fund
- The Kaddish was cited in Parliament to commemorate the victims of the Shoah;
- Designating April 16th as a national Holocaust Memorial Day compulsory in all public schools to commemorate the anniversary of the start of deportations in 1944 ;
- Teaching of Holocaust history was made mandatory in schools for 5th-12th graders;
- The Holocaust Memorial and Documentation Center and the House of Terror Memorial Museum have been established;
- Restitution claims of Holocaust survivors have been settled;
- Establishment and financial support of the Tom Lantos Institute in Hungary in association with the Lantos Foundation on Human Rights;
- Doubling the pension payments of Holocaust survivors;
- 2012 was proclaimed as Raoul Wallenberg Memorial Year
- A Holocaust memorial committee chaired by the head of the Prime Minister's Office has been set up to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Hungarian Holocaust in 2014;
- Each section of the bank of the Danube bears the name of people who saved lives making these unsung heroes household names for Hungarians and visitors alike;
- A ground-breaking, historic data exchange agreement has been signed with Yad Vashem to open Hungarian archives so that the history of the Shoah can be more thoroughly studied and the victims accurately named, accounted for and remembered;
- Hungary repeatedly requested the US authorities to shut down the openly anti-Semitic, Nazi-style Hungarian language website called kuruc.info which operates in the United States;
- Paramilitary groups inciting hatred were banned and the criminal code was tightened regarding uniformed crime;
- The House Rules of the Parliament were tightened and now the Speaker can fine or exclude MPs from the floor if they use hateful language;
- In a first, the courts convicted a Holocaust denier. In the sentence, offender was ordered to visit either the Holocaust Museum, Yad Vashem or Auschwitz, and write a report about what he learnt from that trip.

Is it a respectable list? Yes, it is. Has the Hungarian political and cultural elite done enough to counter racism in Hungary? No, not by a long shot. Is it true that occasionally the government side was slow and ineffective in its statements and actions? Yes, unfortunately it is true.

I earlier referred to the fact that anti-Semitism and racism in general have been on the rise, which tells us that both official Hungary and civil society must do much more in this field. Having said this, let me conclude by a probably surprising closing statement: in terms of government actions to foster Jewish life and to combat anti-Semitism in Hungary, all of the

milestones I cited a minute ago, I mean: all of them, with the one exception of the Jewish Heritage Fund, have been introduced by either the first or the second administrations of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Actions speak for themselves.

Thank you very much for your attention. I am ready for your comments and questions.