



Gábor Szétey, Szilvia Szilágyi

"And I am gay"

Interview with Hungarian secretary of state Gábor Szétey

"My name is Gábor Szétey, secretary of state for human resources for the government of the Republic of Hungary. I believe in God, in love, in freedom, and in equality. I am a Hungarian and a European... A partner, a friend, sometimes an enemy. And I am gay." Gábor Szétey, Hungarian secretary of state, spoke these words at the opening ceremony of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transsexual Festival in Hungary in July. Two days later, people taking part in the festival were assaulted. Szilvia Szilágyi asked Szétey about his decision and whether intolerance towards homosexuals is growing in Hungary today.

Szilvia Szilágyi: Klaus Wowereit, the mayor of Berlin, announced in 2001 before his election that he was homosexual. Previously, Bertrand Delanoë, the mayor of Paris, had spoken about his sexual orientation on television. Although they ruffled some feathers, they did not evoke any extreme reactions. Here in Hungary, two days after the speech, extremists attacked gays taking part in the gay pride demonstration. Were you not upset by that?

Gábor Szétey: If you are asking whether all this would have happened if I hadn't come out, my answer is yes. The counter-demonstration was premeditated: weeks before we knew that something was brewing. It's possible that my speech whipped up the anger of the extremists, which makes me feel bad, but sadly we have to be aware that since 19 September last year,¹ we've been living in a different country from before. If we pay close attention, we see that on Saturday the flag of the House of Árpád, the faces, the symbols were all the same as those used in September. This is an extreme rightwing group that is not big, but is loud and provocative.

SS: Did the "great predecessors" of yours that we mentioned play a role in your decision?

GS: I did study their stories. We think in the same way on many things. What matters is that I am not a gay politician but a social democratic and liberal politician who happens to be gay. From now on my task will be easier: I won't have to lie to anyone.

SS: Volker Beck, the legal expert for the green faction in the Bundestag, once said that the days things are normal will be when political or economic leaders announce they are gay and no one asks them for an interview afterwards. I feel rather stupid to be troubling you with questions.

GS: From Thursday evening until Friday evening I received many more questions from journalists than in the whole of the preceding year, but this is

because this is still unusual here. They will ask once or twice more this week. From next week I can get back to work on reforming the government's human resources policy.

SS: Was it a relief?

GS: Very much so. I'd had enough of having to go to receptions and being asked where my girlfriend was, of having to lie. According to the FIDESZ [The Hungarian Civic Union], my sexuality is my own private affair and not a public issue — but by the law of averages there are many others in my position. And I hope we can help society to deal well with the problems related to sexual difference.

SS: In future, do you intend to deal with gay issues, for example the legality of their cohabitation, their equal rights? These were the main questions at the festival...

GS: These aren't for me to resolve. That's not my job, I was just helping out. As it happens, the solution suggested by the SZDSZ [Alliance of Free Democrats] is an appealing one, whether or not we refer to this legal institution as gay marriage or not. What matters is that it should provide equality. If I expect tolerance of my way of life, I have to be tolerant of others, too. If for those of religious conviction it is important that the word "marriage" relate only to the bond between a man and a woman, then let's refer to this bond in a different way. Actually, I was pleasantly surprised by the Hungarian media's response: I wasn't the target of insulting comments even from quarters I was expecting them from.

SS: Maybe I'm pessimistic, but it seems to me that we aren't going down the western European path in this regard, either. After twelve years of relatively peaceful marches, in Hungary they are now beating up gays like in Poland or Russia.

GS: In my opinion, it is only a tiny minority that rejects progress. The MDF [Hungarian Democratic Forum], which defines itself as a modern conservative party, responded appropriately. FIDESZ's claim that this is a private matter is not one I can make any sense of, since it's obvious that the question of homosexuality in Hungary today is one for society as a whole.

SS: But Saturday also showed that a handful of aggressive people are capable of traumatizing the majority. There will no doubt be others who draw the conclusion that they can no longer reveal their identity.

GS: This isn't an easy road. We can't go back just because a few people react aggressively. That would be to show they are right — and they aren't. I was impressed by the Szonda Ipsos survey after my speech which showed 51 per cent saying that they thought it was brave, that it would improve things. It is interesting how important it is for rightwing politicians that Hungarian minorities outside Hungary be treated well, but not to recognize minorities here as people with full rights. Yet my feeling is that Hungarian society has improved too much in seventeen years to run scared of a very small-scale threat.

SS: Your speech laid down the gauntlet not only for the opposition, but also for the government. No doubt you had to agree things before you took on the opening speech — something a number of politicians have backed out of in

previous years.

GS: I hesitated for a week or two myself before accepting the invitation, and naturally I asked the prime minister beforehand. He said that the positive side of politics is that one should do what one believes in, and that if this was important to me, I should do it. In Argentina I was an employee of a multinational company and I lived very well. But I would have been betraying myself if I'd missed the opportunity I was given to come home and do something to make this country a better place. I am about to turn forty. And I can see that it is not money that is the most important thing, but whether or not I have contributed to making the world a better place.

SS: Here, the ideal identity is to be heterosexual, male, and to be able to prove one's Hungarian ethnic roots.

GS: You have to learn languages and listen to the news in other countries. In other countries, the acceptance of homosexuals is not questioned. I taught at New York Drama Academy for four years from 1998. This period meant a lot to me. This is where I saw for the first time that gay identity can be accepted and that non-gays feel better for it, too. This goes for Scandinavia and the English-speaking world, but even in deeply Catholic areas such as Spain and Italy, the right of gays to enter into formal cohabitation is recognized.

SS: Perhaps because there, the concept of Christian love is taken more literally. In your case, how can you square your faith with your gay identity?

GS: I wouldn't have come out were I not a believer, though for a long while this is what prevented me from doing so. I had to pose myself the question of whether this was OK, whether this was natural. My conclusion was that it was. As I have no children, I have to weigh up my every action in terms of my contribution to what happens in the world. My stab at acting was in a similar vein, but I can see now that it was not a very rational career decision.

SS: It certainly has had the result of making you a good speaker. And you were not improvising: you had the more expressive words in the speech written in advance.

GS: I polished the text very carefully. It was important, with me preparing for one of the most important appearances of my life, that every word be in the right place. I read it to myself many, many times beforehand, but I still could not know what the audience's reaction would be. It was better than I expected. At drama school they taught us to know a text inside and out, and to be able to control ourselves in any situation. In fact, I was moved to tears at a different point from where I thought I would be.

SS: Can you learn how to react in the face of abuse? How can you deal with being called unnatural or a showcase homosexual?

GS: I learned long ago that extremists must not be responded to in extreme fashion — and in any case what matters is to make people better informed, for them to realize and to learn that to be gay is a question of fate, not of choice. Would any half-intelligent person in Hungary choose this for themselves? I didn't admit it to myself until I was 29 years old. I can see what tragic lives people can be subjected to, what it can be like to live in a marriage that is a pretence, to bring up children while yearning for something else or rather repressing that yearning. A normal relationship between two people means that

they live in a satisfactory intellectual, emotional, and financial bond, and that they love one another. In this there's no difference between heterosexuals and homosexuals. The strongest restraining force, actually, is the love you have for your parents, and not wanting them to be hurt. I met younger gays at the festival who told me that my speech had set them on the road to facing up to their families. That was the best experience I had.

SS: Had you previously played a role in the gay movement?

GS: No, I'd only been on a few marches. I was surprised by how strong a culture this enjoys elsewhere, and how significant a consumer class this minority represents. Here in Hungary, this issue is surrounded by fear. But we must see the back of the culture of silence and fear, and this is why we need those fighting for human rights. It matters to me that I encourage this. But I'm no revolutionary.

SS: Are you not bothered that the government currently regards you as its pride and joy?

GS: Those who were at the event, like Klára Dobrev or Ági Horváth² came as friends. I invited no one, but if they felt like coming, I was happy.

SS: In this day and age can a politician who doesn't admit his homosexuality be blackmailed?

GS: I hope not, but we could be exposed to this danger at any time. Politics is heading in a bad direction in a number of ways, but there is a gentlemen's agreement that public figures do not gossip about each other's private lives. But I would be lying if I said that I wasn't afraid of being attacked. When politicians enter office, they have to fill out a form — and once I was handed this document, I couldn't sleep at night because I didn't know how to respond to the question as to whom I live with. I was honest then, too, but was afraid of the consequences. I no longer have to worry about that.

SS: Are the self-defence mechanisms you have built up starting to fall apart?

GS: I'd rather say they are being transformed. I no longer have to think of what lie I should use, but how I should respond to the way people react. I have fought to be where I am now.

¹ 19 September 2006: the date when rioting broke out in Budapest following Hungarian prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsány's "lying speech". The rioters belonged overwhelmingly to far-Right groups.

² Klára Dobrev: wife of prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsány; Ágnes Horváth: minister for health (SZDSZ) — trans.

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