



## Politics

22nd Mar 2004

### **Helping Hungary find a voice on the Hill** **by Carolyn Chapman**

By night, Sándor Nagy is a typical law student. But he spends his days on Capitol Hill, in a small, sun-filled office with a few computers, an espresso machine in the corner, and sketches for possible logos on the wall.

This has been Nagy's office since October, when the Center for Hungarian-American Congressional Relations (CHACR), which he founded in December 2002, moved out of his suburban Washington living room and into its new office. Nearly every other ethnic group in America has long had a group to provide it with a collective voice on the Hill. But the CHACR is the first group devoted to making the voices of 1.5 million Hungarian-Americans heard in Congress. "Everyone has a caucus to represent them. There is even a 'friends of the animals' caucus," says Nagy. "But until now there was no Hungarian-American caucus."

Like Hungary, a small country finding its place in Europe, the CHACR is finding its place on the Hill and competing with well-funded, highly skilled lobby organizations. The center's 12 staff members – fueled mainly by passion rather than funding – are all volunteers, and are either students or have full-time jobs. "It's fun," says Nagy, "because when I come in here and see people working, I know it's because they really want to be here on their days off, because they really believe in what we are doing."

There is a map of the U.S. hanging on the office wall, with areas having sizable Hungarian-American communities highlighted in green. The few green areas on the map are mostly in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Florida and California. After founding the CHACR, Nagy traveled to Hungarian-American communities in seven states, building the foundations for his grassroots network and introducing the center. He held town hall meetings in Hungarian church halls and social halls, explaining how lobbying works and why Hungarian-Americans need a voice on the Hill.

One of the CHACR's first victories was convincing members of Congress to join a Hungarian-American Caucus, which was founded in June 2003 and now has 19 members.

"Because Hungarian-Americans are so concentrated, I can't believe that making a caucus didn't happen sooner," says David Nadasi, a CHACR research assistant

and a student at George Washington University. "Hungarian-Americans make up huge voting blocks in certain areas."

The caucus is chaired by Rep. Ernest Istook (Republican, Oklahoma), Rep. Steny Hoyer (Democrat, Maryland), Rep. Christopher Shays (Republican, Connecticut), and Rep. Tom Lantos (Democrat, California).

Last fall, the caucus sent a letter to Romanian President Ion Iliescu, concerning the human rights of ethnic Hungarians in Romania. But because the CHACR is still relatively new and small, and has limited influence, Nagy is careful not to take on battles that are too big.

One issue that he is enthusiastic about is the center's first major human rights campaign, an effort to help a village get a border crossing. The village of Szelmenc (called Solontsi in Ukrainian and Velke Slemence in Slovak), is divided by the Ukrainian-Slovak border and lies 12 miles north of the Hungarian border. Its population is largely made up of ethnic Hungarians. The village was divided between the then Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia in 1944, and a barbed wire fence and guard towers erected, dividing families and friends. The villagers have been asking for a border crossing for 60 years, with no luck. Now the CHACR is asking Hungarian-Americans to help convince Slovakia and Ukraine to open one.

"This is a forgotten village. It's as if time froze there," says Nagy, who visited the village in early March. "This story really is a relic of the Cold War. It's not just an inconvenience, it's an injustice. This is an issue that we can win with grassroots action."

The villagers are not asking to be reunited under the same flag, but just to be able to travel to the other side of the village by crossing the street, rather than going through the bureaucratic hassle of applying for visas, going to the nearest border crossing 40 kilometers away, and waiting in lengthy lines. To travel literally across the street in Szelmenc is a time-consuming, expensive trip for these mostly impoverished people.

Nagy has made it his and the CHACR's mission to get Congress to ask the Slovak prime minister and the Ukrainian president to create a border crossing before Slovakia joins the European Union in May. After May, borders will get tighter, and getting a border crossing will be more difficult, Nagy explains.

There will be a congressional briefing on April 21, where mayors from both sides of the village will testify in what will be their first trips outside of the region. The ambassadors of Slovakia, Ukraine and the EU will also be invited.

Nagy hopes that villagers will no longer have to watch funerals and weddings through a fence, and that shouting across barbed wire will no longer be a necessary form of communication.

The money to bring the two mayors to Washington was raised by the CHACR in a

Saturday afternoon fundraising session. The fundraising committee often meets on Saturdays "because we can use our free cell phone minutes to make calls," says Nagy. "We asked people to pledge \$100 each for our Szelmenc campaign, and we raised \$1,700 in one day."

The CHACR also spends much of its time on individual casework, such as contacting members of Congress to help with constituents' visa problems. In such work, it has had no trouble getting problems solved. But it has been more difficult to drum up interest in human rights issues, says Nagy.

"I'm learning a lot of things on the fly," says Nagy, who got his first exposure to Capitol Hill when he interned for Rep. Istook, a Hungarian-American, in the summer of 2002. Nagy has a political science degree from California State University Fresno. "I can be a resource for staffers," he says.

For example, congressional staffers have called the CHACR several times inquiring about Hungarian churches or groups in their districts, he says. Nagy is still uncertain about what he will do when he finishes law school. One thing he does know, however, is that he would like the CHACR to be an entity on its own, not entirely dependent on him.

He's also already thinking about the center's next major issue: campaigning for the restitution of over 2,000 Hungarian churches in Romania, which were confiscated during communist times and never returned. "This organization is already more than just my vision," he says. "I now have a staff."

Carolyn Chapman is a journalist who has worked in both Budapest and Washington, D.C., writing for publications including Washington Diplomat and Central European Business Weekly.