

An Interview with Andras Balog

Survival: Lives of Hungarians under Communist
and Capitalist Governments 1956-2006
Oral History Series

Interviews conducted by
Virginia Major Thomas
in 2008

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Discursive Table of Contents—Andras Balog

Family background and education—The 1956 Revolution—Various jobs and traveling—Life under Communism—Break with Communism—Work since 1989—Discussion of contemporary Hungary

Biography

Andras Balog describes himself as the son of “a poor family from the countryside”. His mother was a cleaning lady and his father a driver for the Ministry of the Interior, transporting prisoners. Andras first became a locksmith and while working finished high school at night school and by correspondence. He advanced to become a textile machine technician, and in that capacity he traveled all over Hungary and then east, eventually to Iran where he taught himself Farsi and English. He was a member of the Communist Party but began to question Communism when he talked to American soldiers in Iran. Eventually in 1988 he refused to rejoin the party. He also traveled extensively in the west. When in 1990 his company went bankrupt, he became a full-time self-employed taxi driver, a job he’d done part-time under Communism. As a taxi driver he began working as a guide and then as a courier between the USAID and the American embassy. Slowly he moved into work as a general services assistant for the Peace Corps, as computer network manager for another company after having taught himself computer skills.

Andras has insightful assessments of conditions in Hungary today. Although he says he personally is making enough money to live well, he sees many others who do not have enough. He does not blame Communism or its legacy for this but rather capitalist propaganda which he reports as saying that under capitalism you can do whatever you want. He finds the current political and economic conditions in Hungary lacking in many things.

Circumstances of Interview

I interviewed Andras Balog on November 21, 2008 in my rented apartment at Csorsz utca 5 in Budapest, Hungary. He was referred to me by Berne Weiss, whom I have known in the Friends (Quaker) Meeting in Budapest for a number of years. The purpose and procedure of the interview were explained to him by telephone and in person in Budapest, and he was very cooperative and willing to share his story and point of view in the interview.

Editing of the Interview

The interview was transcribed by me with minor grammatical corrections. In addition, I omitted some discursive comments I had made during the interview and then merged Andras’ comments on my comments, which enabled me to shorten the text somewhat without causing any change in the meaning of his statements.

INTERVIEW WITH ANDRÁS BALOG (b. 7/23/1949) Nov. 21, 2008

AB: András Balog

MT: Major Thomas

MT: This is Major Thomas at Csorsz utca 5 in Budapest, Hungary, and I am interviewing András Balog. Let's begin by asking you where and when you were born and a little bit about your family.

AB: I was born in 1949, July 23, and my parents came from a poor family from the countryside, my mother was a maid for rich people and my father was actually a driver, but before there were cars, he drove a horse-pulled cart. And they met in Budapest and they lived in Budapest. My father was in the Second World War, he was a prisoner of war in Russia, and he just came back before my birth. I have a sister and a brother, my sister was born in 1946 and my brother was born in 1955, so we are three. My mother was a cleaning lady for a company and my father was a driver, he was a driver for a prison, a prisoner car, actually he was not a policeman but he was wearing a uniform, he was an employee of the state because it was under the Ministry of the Interior. I went to school here in Budapest, and after I finished elementary school I went to learn to be a locksmith.

MT: That was like a trade school?

AB: Yes, and I went to the same company as a locksmith where my mother worked, and I worked in that company for 28 years, and during those years I finished high school in night school and correspondence school, and my highest level is a technician.

MT: What kind of technician?

AB: A mechanical technician. First I was working as a locksmith, later I worked installing textile machines. This company produced textile machines, and first I was installing and renovating textile machines, and later I was a supervisor for different groups and I traveled all around Hungary visiting textile factories, and later I was traveling abroad.

MT: Since you were born in 1949, the Communist government was already established in Hungary when you were born. So tell me about your life after you got out of school.

AB: Actually, my connection to the Communist government, when I was in school I was a Pioneer, with a red necktie, and later when I went to school to learn to be a locksmith I joined the young Communist Party, I was a member, and later in 1968-1969 I joined the Communist Party, I was a member of the Communist Party.

MT: Tell me, what did you do in the Young Pioneers and in the Young Communist Party? What did they do?

AB: The Young Pioneers, we didn't do too much, we made friendships together, we went to different places for singing when there were some events, we had a chorus, and it wasn't that interesting as a Young Pioneer because all of the school children did it.

MT: I had someone tell me that as a Young Pioneer she went out in the woods and played cowboys and Indians.

AB: Yes, when we could go to summer camp, and in the summer camp we were fighting each other, we put a number on our head and we had to read the other group's numbers, whose number was read fell out, and the winner was the group who had the most people at the end.

MT: Was the purpose to learn to read numbers?

AB: No, it was just play.

MT: And as a Young Communist, what did you do?

AB: Sometimes we took extra work to help people, and sometimes for example if a member of the party got a new apartment all of us went to help them, we went to meetings and after the meeting we had a party, we went dancing, we had sport competitions, not too many interesting things but we had a relatively interesting life. We had many things to do.

MT: In the Young Communist meetings were you taught Marxism and Leninism, did you have teaching lectures or talks? It was more communal, social activities?

AB: Yes, it was a communal social group, we were talking about the news, we were talking about the problems in the factories, and we had nice ideas.

MT: But there wasn't systematic teaching of ideas?

AB: There was, there was Marxism Leninism high school and Marxism Leninism University.

MT: But not in the Young Communists?

AB: Not in that group, I could join the Marxism Leninism high school. I finished high school but I didn't go to the university.

MT: And did you agree with what the Communist taught about history? I'm sure you didn't hear it in grade school but you did later on.

AB: When we went to meetings, we didn't know what life was like outside the country. We didn't know too much about life, how it was. From the history we learned about bad capitalism, and we had a good life.

MT: Tell me about your life.

AB: What you don't know, you don't miss. If you don't know about television, you don't miss it, you don't miss sitting in front of the television. If you don't know what Coca Cola is, you don't miss Coca Cola. We had for example in 1956 I call it revolution or I can call it counter-revolution, at

that time we learned this was a counter-revolution, and later they changed it to revolution, it all depends on which side you are on. I was 7 years old. I just know that when this happened the people went to the prison and they opened the doors to free the prisoners and at that time my father came home and stayed at home during all the revolution and didn't go out to the street.

MT: He was not in prison.

AB: No, he was a driver.

MT: Was it a very upsetting time?

AB: Yes, I remember, because my mother went in the morning for bread, and----this is my memory of the revolution----there was a long line waiting for bread, it was not open yet but people had lined up for bread. My mother took my sister and myself because if there were more people they give more bread, because if only one person they gave a half bread but if more they gave more bread. And I remember that a truck came full of people in the back and for fun they shot at the people but not at the people but above the people, to frighten them, only for joy, I remember that, they didn't hurt anyone, they just scared people, I remember that. And my brother was sick during that time and my parents had to take him to the hospital, it was dangerous on the streets, it was a scary time.

MT: It was a scary time. And after that did it get better, or just the same?

AB: For me it was better in the school. I was a bad student, I was mischiefy, and I was a bad boy. I didn't study enough, I don't say I wasn't a clever boy but I was lazy. I think it was the same in school; the only thing was they changed the picture from Rakosi to Kadar, the only change! In that area, where I went to school, working people lived in that area, and we didn't meet with rich boys who had other ideas so we didn't meet other ideas. We had enough to eat. Because my parents didn't get enough money

for extra things, in the summer I went to work and I purchased a bicycle from that money, when I was 13 years old, I went to work in the summer picking cherries and fruits and what money I earned my parents added the same amount and I could buy a bicycle for myself.

MT: Was the bicycle for work or for play, for joy?

AB: It was for joy. But later I went on the bicycle to school because it was far away. But I didn't buy it for that, it was for fun. When I went to work I used it for fun because public transport was very cheap.

MT: At that time, you had enough money to afford what was necessary and then some, like the bicycle, you had a little bit extra.

AB: Yes, and I even had enough money to go to dance, I had enough money to get drunk, I had enough money to take my girlfriend to a restaurant and drink a bottle of wine, and later when I went to work I had enough money to buy my motorcycle. Later I had enough money to buy my first car.

MT: When was that, about when?

AB: When I bought my first motorbike it was in 1967. When I bought my first car it was in 1970.

MT: And when you were working, how did you travel around Europe, by car I presume?

AB: For example, when I was young I went by bicycle to Czechoslovakia, because I liked bicycling. Later, I traveled by train. When I had a motorcycle, I traveled by that. Actually when I worked for the factory, many times we went by bus and for vacation to places in Hungary. In the summer I went for one week or two weeks, the factory where I worked had a summer house and I could get one or two weeks holiday there for very little money. I went to Austria and Czechoslovakia for the labor union.

MT: To labor union meetings?

AB: No, no, I paid the labor union and through the labor union I could spend one or two weeks at a summer camp in Hungary or even abroad, a vacation spot, and I had to pay one week's salary for one week. I had to pay that much. This was in the '70's.

MT: Was there any problem with your leaving Hungary and traveling to other countries for either vacation or for work?

AB: In socialist countries there was not a problem. For the west with a passport I could travel. I could travel once in a year if somebody invited me, and I could get money for traveling every three years, so I could travel every three years as a tourist but if I had my own money I could travel every year.

MT: If you had to travel for work?

AB: I could travel any time if I went for work. The first time I traveled to Bulgaria in 1972. The first time I went west, east, I went to Iran in 1973.

MT: Did you go to work in West Germany or France or Austria?

AB: To work, no, because my company didn't export to those countries, but I went to work in Mexico, I was sent by my company in 1980, I went to Pueblo, and I stayed there for 3 months.

MT: Where did you learn English?

AB: In Iran. I studied for one year in elementary school, but in the school I learned Russian, English was an extra, and we had to pay extra to learn English. When I went to Iran I learned English there.

MT: How?

AB: I went to the Iranian-American Society and I learned English from Farsi because I spoke Farsi.

MT: How did you learn Farsi? Here in Hungary?

AB: No, there, in Iran, I taught myself. I stayed in Iran for one and a half years. First I was in Tehran, and then I was in Esfahan. I was in Esfahan

most of the time. It was very beautiful. Also I went to Shiraz. It was from 1973 to 1975. Then I went back in 1976. Actually I went to Iran from Iraq; I worked in Iraq in 1976.

MT: What was the nature of the work you were doing?

AB: I was a textile machine technician. We were producing the machines and I was installing the machines or renovating old machines. Some of them were Hungarian machines but sometimes we were changing just some parts.

MT: And you were sent there by your company. Did you like it there?

AB: I loved it, I loved it. In that time it was beautiful and the people were very nice, I loved it. After that, when I came home from there, I began to talk in the Communist meeting that the life is not exactly like what they are telling about the west.

MT: Had you already been to Mexico?

AB: No, first I went to Iran, and then I went to Iraq. During this time I was traveling to Germany, to Austria, in 1976 I traveled to Germany, all around Germany, to Belgium, to London, I spent one month in England, all around, Scotland, I went to Paris and back to Hungary. This was a tourist trip.

MT: When did you first notice there was a difference between life in Hungary and life abroad, in Iran or in Iraq or in the west?

AB: The first time was in Iran, in '73. I was talking to Americans there, at that time there were American soldiers there, in Esfahan there was an American military base, a helicopter base, and in the evening when I went to a bar in the hotel I made friends with American soldiers.

MT: What did they say?

AB: They were asking me questions, I was asking them questions, and I just learned that the life is easier in western countries than in Hungary. Because if I worked as much in western countries as I worked in socialist countries I

could get much more improvement. Improvement because if I work very hard the advantage was that I could travel abroad because I was a good worker but I didn't get more money so I couldn't buy anything. But if I travel abroad I could get much more money there.

MT: You mean if you worked in western countries you would get more money than you got for work in Hungary.

AB: Yes. I get my salary and I get my per diem for the country where I went and I could save some money from the per diem, and that was the extent. When I went to work in Iran I met people, I met these Americans, and they told me about the salaries, and we talked about when the Hungarian was on one side of the border and they were on the other side of the border, in 1968. I was a soldier in 1968 when there was the Czechoslovakian war, I was in for 2 years, I was not in Czechoslovakia but I knew about it of course. When I came back from Iran I went to the Communist meeting and I talked in conversation to the people there and told them what I had learned. They asked me questions. At that time, it was about 1976, there was much more freedom of talking. We could talk much more freely than before.

MT: Did you have access to western newspapers and TV and radio?

AB: Radio we had access to, we were listening to Radio Luxemburg for music, we could listen to Radio Free Europe. Usually in Radio Free Europe they were talking about Hungary and freedom, how it used to be in Hungary, under Rakosi, they thought it was still that way; they were Hungarians who had left Hungary. As for TV, near the border we could see Austrian television, but not in Budapest. We didn't know too much. So when I told people what I had heard in Iran, it was new for them and they listened and asked me questions.

MT: When you continued to travel, what did you discover? When you were on vacation, say, in England and France Paris.

AB: I had an English girlfriend and when I went to England I really was in the real life. She was in Hungary, she wanted to come to live in Hungary, I wanted to go to live in England, and we couldn't agree we didn't stay together.

MT: Why did you want to go to England? To be with her? Or because the life was better?

AB: I thought that the life was better. But when I was in Iran they offered me a very good job there, to stay there, but I didn't want to leave Hungary. But if I married her I could officially leave Hungary and I could come back any time. I didn't want to leave Hungary illegally, first of all, it is not good for my family, and second, I cannot come home.

MT: If you left illegally would your family have been hurt?

AB: I thought so, I thought so. They were talking about that, but my brother left Hungary illegally and I had nothing happen. He left in 1980, he went to Germany, and he didn't come back. [My family didn't suffer], I could even travel any time, and I had no trouble.

MT: Did you see anything that made you think life was better in the west? More goods in the shops, more food to eat, anything?

AB: I don't say life was better. Freedom was more. Traveling. I could go anywhere, as a tourist I saw that. Now, as I travel, I see that freedom is nothing if you have no money to go anywhere. If you don't have money to travel, what can you do with your freedom? What is the use of talking freely if there is no reason to talk? If I want to change anything, I should not shout from outside, I should change it from inside, much better to change from inside.

MT: And did you think that, when you heard from the soldiers in Iran and saw a different life in the west, you'd like to change Hungary from within?

AB: I was talking in a way that we could change, not a big change, but some of them, and not only me but many other people, and slowly, slowly we could travel more, we could travel more frequently, not just every 3 years but we could travel freely from 1980 on.

MT: And you actually could travel more freely?

AB: We could, yes, it happened, it happened even during the Communist time.

MT: So you in general found life in Hungary under the Kadar regime perfectly acceptable until you heard the soldiers talk of travel in the west and then you wanted to change things?

AB: Yes and when they made a new Communist party in 1987-89, in 1988, in that time I didn't join.

MT: You didn't rejoin. What did joining the Communist party mean? Did it have any results? Did you get privileges or were you able to do more work? More travel? Was there something you had as a member of the Communist party that those who did not join did not have?

AB: Some people joined the Communist party because they had some advantage. Around 5 or 10 people were traveling, and only 2 or 3 were card members of the Communist party. It was not the reason I could travel more. The reason was that I worked more and better than the others, I worked more than the others. There were many benefits for many people. They joined the Communist party, and they didn't work hard, they just spent the time, and still they got good salaries and a good life.

MT: Suppose you didn't join the Communist party and you didn't work hard, would you still get a good salary?

AB: No, no. Even I worked hard and I didn't get a good salary, and I was told I would get a good salary when I traveled abroad, and that was true.

MT: I get the impression you liked your work.

AB: I loved it, the reason why I left my company in 1990 was it went bankrupt. My work changed so I had to go to another field inside the company, then it went bankrupt.

MT: Were you surprised when the changes came in 1989?

AB: No. I saw it coming. First of all the Communist party was divided into 2 Communist parties, about 1988. It started with that. One Communist party followed the old Communist party, now it is the Munkas party; the other is the Socialist party. The reason was because they didn't ask me if I agreed with the separation, only when they separated they asked me did I want to join this party or that one, I said no, I don't want to join anything. Still my thinking is Socialist, but I don't want to join anything

MT: Did you feel that these were unstable parties?

AB: No, no, I don't want to be a party member anymore.

MT: Why not?

AB: I give more than what I get. There was no reason to join. My idea is the same if I join or not.

MT: So you thought with the splitting of the Communist party that things were not going to continue?

AB: No, I didn't think of that. The reason I didn't want to quit from the Communist party was because I was a member for a long time, I was talking, I was active, but when they separated I didn't join again.

MT: But you said you foresaw the changes of 1989-90 because you saw this division of the Communist party.

AB: You know, when I joined it I joined it because I loved it, because I liked the idea. But later I recognized that the idea is different from the life. That is why I didn't continue.

MT: But did you think that because it was different from your life that the Communist system was going to go down?

AB: The idea is good, but until the people live it on the earth it will not succeed.

MT: I read a historian of Communism who said that Marx's ideas were "good ideas but wrong species", meaning good ideas but they won't work with human beings.

AB: Yes. Idea is good, but the people... When they are poor they support the idea, immediately as they get some money they forget about it.

MT: And the idea we're talking about is the idea of everybody being equal?

AB: No, no. The idea means that everybody should get according to their need. So I don't agree on that one, that because I have more chance I can get me a hundred dollars, if I don't get a chance but I am the same cleverness as the other and I am working as hard as the other but I get only a few dollars that I can live on.

MT: So people don't get according to how much work they do, they should get according to their need.

AB Their need and according to their work, both, how hard they work and according to their need.

MT: So what happened to you after the changes and the company went bankrupt?

AB: Actually, since I was 22 or 23 years old, I always had a part-time job. I was a taxi driver.

MT: Did you need to have 2 jobs to live well?

AB: To get a better life, yes. And later, I liked that, I loved it.

MT: So you continued being a taxi driver?

AB: Yes, and after I left the company I became a private taxi driver.

Working for a state taxi company it was their car and I was only a driver, but later I had my own car and I started as a private taxi driver.

MT: And did you make a better income and have a better life?

AB: A much better income and a better life.

MT: So after the changes and you had a private business, it was better than it had been before.

AB: Yes, my life was better, and I was working for the Hilton Hotel as a guide.

MT: So you became a guide too. Did you have to have training for that?

AB: I learned for myself. I purchased a book and I learned everything from that.

MT: If you are a guide, do you have to get a license from the city or the state?

AB: Not for the guiding, at that time it was not necessary. But for the taxi, I had to have a taxi license. There are two types of licenses, to own a taxi and to drive a taxi.

MT: And were you guiding for the Hilton Hotel? Were you employed by the Hilton Hotel?

AB: Actually, I was not employed by the hotel but when they needed me they called me. I didn't have a private guiding business, during driving the taxi I was guiding. I never guided a group, only the people who wanted to take a taxi. Mostly Americans, mostly tourists. I liked it.

MT: So tell me what happened when you got your own taxi and started guiding?

AB: I did it for one and a half years, and after I worked as a taxi driver first for the USAID, later I worked for the Peace Corps.

MT: How did that happen?

AB: They employed me as a taxi driver as a courier between the USAID and the embassy, then they contracted me.

MT: How did that come about?

AB: Someone worked there who knew me and they needed a driver who could do a service. Later I started to drive the USAID cars. Later when someone left the GSA, General Services Assistant, when he went for a holiday I took his place for that time, and later when they moved to a new office they assigned me a part in the moving. After that there was a place in the Peace Corps I knew about, and I applied for the job, and they employed me as a general services assistant.

MT: You didn't go outside of Hungary?

AB: No. I was in the Peace Corps office in Budapest, and I was working with them until 1997. I loved that work, but they left Hungary so they closed the office. After that I was working as a taxi driver again because I had my license, and I worked as a head hunter for a human research company.

MT: Head hunter? You mean you looked for people.....

AB: Yes, for people for employing.

MT: What kind of work would they do? What kind of research was this?

AB: Different types, any type. Human research. The company would need an employee, you tell me what kind of person you like, and I am paid to research where this type of person works, and I offer them the job. I started about 1997, and I did it for a while, and then I was working as a computer network manager for the same company.

MT: How did you learn about computers?

AB: From myself.

MT: When did you first learn about computers?

AB: 1987, the first computer was the Commodore, later I had a PC, the first PC I purchased was in 1991. When I went to work for the Peace Corps, there I learned the Macintosh; I was a computer network manager in the Peace Corps. Later I went to work for the GPS Company, they produced a new GPS in Hungary, first I was a salesman, later I was sales manager.

MT: Your English comes in handy. Do you speak other languages besides English?

AB: Earlier I spoke Farsi and later I learned Amharic, which is Ethiopian. I studied a little Spanish when I was in Mexico, but when I was there I could speak to everybody in English, but I learned enough for work. But I forget

MT: Tell me about your life after 1989-90. Do you feel that it is better economically, in terms of what you can say and what you can read or see on television, is it better, the same, just different, not necessarily better?

What's it like?

AB: In the beginning, in 1990, it started to be very good. In freedom, I could travel anywhere that I wished, I traveled to the Far East, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, I traveled to Kenya, to Zimbabwe, and so I could travel. And in Europe every year I could travel to Croatia, to Greece. This was all vacations. [When] I had enough money it was very good, when I was on my private enterprise it was really very good. It was good if I didn't pay tax for everything. Taxes were not high. At that time taxis were very cheap, but sometimes I would drive 250-300 kilometers a day. And when I went to work for foreigners my rate was \$24 for one hour and it was good, it was not too much for Americans, the market price, but it was very high for others.

But later when I started to work for the Peace Corps the salary was much higher, it was a better time, it was a better salary, which was in the middle '90's. Later working as a sales manager I still had a good salary. But now, my salary is high, but I have to pay 64% for taxes for everything. So if I want to have the same type of life, I cannot do that. I have enough money to have a good life, I have enough money to go to Croatia two-three times for one week holiday, one week in Hungary, one week abroad, and I have enough money for that. But I cannot go and buy a car, because I cannot save the money to buy a car, I have to borrow money to buy a car.

MT: How does this compare to before '89?

AB: Before '89, I had a chance to work more and get more money. For example, if I work 8 hours at a time, after I could stay 4 more in the factory, and get paid more money. It was very interesting at that time; I made a company in the company, so this company worked for the company some jobs, because there were not enough workers, so I could get more money. But now if you want to work you don't have a job. There isn't extra work to do.

MT: So it's not possible to make more money.

AB: Not too much. Even sometimes it is worse because if I do some extra work they take 60-70% of it.

MT: And this tax is state tax, imposed by the Hungarian government.

AB: Yes.

MT: Why do they impose such a high tax? What happens to the money?

AB: I don't know. They spoil it. Some people have one and a half million forints salary, and they get another 600,000, and the government spends a lot of money without reason. There is no evidence that the leaders of the government take money for themselves, I can say that. But I say if

somebody is sitting in the Parliament house, and can get 600,000-700,000 forints they cover their costs, but they don't have to produce an invoice for it. That is where the money is going.

MT: In other words, there is no accountability; these people do not have to say how they spend this money and what things cost.

AB: Yes.

MT: Why don't the Hungarian people vote them out of office, and change the law?

AB: Because they are the ones that make the law.

MT: You can't get rid of them?

AB: If I get rid of them, there will come other ones. Even if they change the government, the next government will do the same thing. This has happened since '89, even Fidesz, or the Socialists, or other parties, they do the same thing. Some of them do it more; some of them do it less.

MT: How is it going to end?

AB: I don't know, maybe this world financial crisis. It's going to be worse for everybody, but maybe there will be some changes.

MT: I've been told that it will take one or maybe two generations after Communism, because under Communism there was order, the people don't feel they need to take control because the state always had control and took care of everything. So a whole generation has to come that understands they have to take control. In a sense there is a continuation of the bad influence of Communism.

AB: It is not the influence of Communism; it is the bad influence of the propaganda that they got. They were told that under capitalism you can do anything you want. That is what they were told from outside. When they

got freedom, they thought capitalism is here, I can do whatever I want. So it is not the effect of Communism.

MT: So a generation has to learn that it doesn't work if everybody does what they want.

AB: Slowly, slowly, it will change.

AB: So you're not too happy with the way things are.

AB: Not at all.

MT: So in a way it's worse than it was under Kadar?

AB: For my life, no. My life is still very good, I don't talk about myself. But I see how people are living around me. When a family is going to the market and they cannot buy a hundred grams of salami for the three children because they don't have money, before they could buy that, but now they cannot buy that because they are working eight hours or they don't have work because he cannot work sometimes. Many people are not working because they don't like to, but many people are not working because they cannot get employment. And western companies came to Hungary and bought up factories and later shut them down and people are out of work. That is not the fault of Communism. That is not the Communist influence.

MT: That's right, it's not. [Interruption] I can't keep you longer, thank you so much for talking with us, thank you.