

An Interview with Eva Beck

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—Eva Beck

Family background and education—Life under the Nazis and the Arrow Cross—Work at bookshop, becoming a Communist, 1956—The Kadar regime, life during this period—Travel—The changes and the present situation

Biography

Eva Beck grew up in an upper middle class Jewish family. Her father was the owner of a leatherware shop and her grandfather the owner of a well-known bottling company in Budapest. She learned German, French and English as a child from nannies and private tutors, but because she was Jewish, under the Horthy regime she had to go to a Jewish gymnasium, as it happened an excellent school. When the Nazis marched into Hungary in 1944, her schooling ended. She survived the Nazi and Arrow Cross regimes first in a “yellow star house”, then hiding in the home of cousins of an old family friend. Her hosts did not know she was Jewish so she had to do a lot of pretending to be like them. But her father was shot by the Arrow Cross and her brother taken away by them to an unknown fate. With the defeat by the Soviet Army of the Nazis and Arrow Cross, she was after a long confusing month reunited with her mother.

These war-time experiences left her emotionally unable to go to school. She got a job in a book store with a remarkably perceptive owner who saw to her education as he trained her to work in the book shop by requiring her to read all the books’ dust jackets and learn what the books were about. She ended up reading voraciously and eventually became both a high-ranking administrator in a state-owned book export company and a convinced Communist. However, she became slowly disillusioned with Communism around the time of the 1956 revolution, although she was not active in it.

During the Kadar regime she led the life of a politically unreliable but very efficient and productive book export company employee. Her account of how she and others walked a narrow line is very interesting. For the company she traveled a great deal, including a trip to the United States during the turbulent 1960’s. In the 1970’s she also traveled as tourists with her family to the west as well as to east bloc countries. She noticed the differences between life in Hungary and elsewhere; most amusing was her discovery of the hunger in East Germany for political jokes which they could not tell but the Hungarians could.

She did not expect the changes of 1989-1990. She has many penetrating comments about the present political, economic and social situation in Hungary today.

Circumstances of Interview

I interviewed Eva Beck on November 19, 2008 in my rented apartment at Csorsz utca 5 in Budapest, Hungary. I had met her briefly the year before through Berne Weiss whom I had known in the Friends (Quaker) Meeting in Budapest for about 5 years. I explained the purpose of the interviews to Eva when we first met in 2007 and again in both emails from the U.S.A. and in person before the interview took place in 2008. She was a very willing and frank participant.

Editing of the Interview

I typed the transcription and edited it to correct a few grammatical errors and to shorten some of my comments made during the interview which were unnecessary to the meaning, and this facilitated the flow of Eva's remarks. The transcript thus edited was sent to Eva for her editing, and hers has not been changed at all.

- Thomas: Major Thomas
- Beck: Eva Beck
- Thomas: This is Major Thomas, and I am at Csorsz utca 5 in Budapest, Hungary, and I am interviewing Eva Beck. Let's start the interview, Eva, by asking you where and when you were born and a little bit about your parents, your family.
- Beck: I was born in Budapest in 1930, 18th of August. My father had a leather ware shop, zips and clips and things for leather ware like bags and suitcases. My mother did not work, except sometimes, mainly as volunteer, not in general, here in Budapest. When I was born we lived together with my grandparents, my mother's family. My grandfather had at that time a very famous coffee-house, existing now too but in a completely different way. (Irish Pub) So we, at that time, lived together, but when I was 8 we moved away. My father's family, so my father actually, comes from Vienna, Austria so I hardly knew my grandparents on his side. After the First World War, in which my father fought, he was a soldier, (an officer) he stayed in Hungary, Budapest-. So our family I would say was an upper middle class Jewish family. I had one brother who was 3 years older than me. When we were children we had a German nanny.
- Thomas: So you learned German as a child?
- Beck: Yes- At home we were absolutely bilingual, so German and Hungarian were spoken all the time. My father spoke Hungarian all his life with a bit of an accent, it is a very difficult language, but my mother was very keen that we should learn Hungarian perfectly so that we should have no problem. Some children in this situation have problems when they go to school because they don't really understand Hungarian, but we didn't have such problems.
- Thomas: And where did you go to school?
- Beck: The system was such that there was an elementary school for the first 4 years, from ages 6 to 10, we went to so-called elementary school which were district schools. There were some private schools but this is not common in Hungary. After the first 4 years, people went to what we call middle schools, in America it would be a high school.
- Thomas: There is a middle school in America which consists of 8th, sometimes of 7th and 8th grades.
- Beck: Well, this was at that time 8 grades, from 10 to 18. When you were 18, then you took the so-called matura, which was the condition to get to the university.
- Thomas: And that's also called gymnasium?

- Beck: Gymnasium, yes.
- Thomas: And we're talking about your going to elementary school before the Second World War, in the '30's?
- Beck: Yes. And I would go to the gymnasium in 1940, but at that time Jews were not allowed to go to the gymnasium. In one class, which was about 30 children, one Jew was permitted to go.
- Thomas: And this is under Horthy?
- Beck: Yes.
- Thomas: So what did you do?
- Beck: So I went to the Jewish school. The Jewish community had at that time already a gymnasium, which was a very good one. But they had to expand a lot because all the Jewish children were compelled to go to the Jewish gymnasium if they wanted to learn, but on the other side it was compulsory to go to school at least until the age of 14, so it was a situation where you had no choice. Actually it was a very good school because many of the teachers were at that time already fired from the university and later as university teachers they taught us at the gymnasium.
- Thomas: And they were fired because they were Jewish?
- Beck: Yes. I went to that school until 1944, only 4 years, because in March, 1944 the Germans occupied Hungary and that was the end of my school course.
- Thomas: And how did you manage under the German occupation and the Arrow Cross regime?
- Beck: Well, this would take a whole interview, several hours, and I don't know if.....
- Thomas: Yes, but you survived.
- Beck: Yes, we survived. The first step was, we had to put on the yellow star, which we had to wear. This was a major requirement, we very quickly did this very important thing. This measure had been introduced already by April 5, just three weeks after the occupation took place. Then, by June we had to leave our homes and we were compelled to move to houses which were called the yellow star houses. There were several houses which were named as "yellow star" houses and everybody, all the Jews in Hungary, had to move to these houses. For instance, we moved to a friend of ours whose house was a yellow star house. In the 4-room flat there were 14 people. The three of us, my mother, my brother and I, we were of course in one room that used to be the

dining room of the family. My father at that time was already in a so called forced labor camp outside Budapest so he was not there. – There we lived until October when the Arrow Cross took over. Then on the 20th of October my brother was taken away and he was deported to Germany – as far as we know, - we don't know exactly, we have some news that he was seen in a concentration camp, probably somewhere in Germany, but who knows. My father escaped from the forced labor camp and he lived with false documents which, at that time, was often a method, for those who could provide those documents and who thought, this would enable them to survive. But there were these-“razzias”---I don't know what the expression is, I think it is a round-up, when the Arrow Cross people surrounded the house and went in and asked for the documents of all the persons who lived there, and if they didn't like the documents or all the documents were not good enough, or they suspected that these documents might be not real, then they just took away the people and shot them into the Danube. There was no account of these people. On one of these occasions my father lost his nerves unfortunately, and he jumped out of the window – he lived on the ground floor, apart from us – and he started to run and he was caught and beaten to death in the cellar of the house where he lived in at that time.

Thomas: Were you there?

Beck: No, no, we didn't know about it at all. We learned about it only in February 1945, when siege of Budapest was already over. My mother and I, we were in the ghetto, which was the Jewish quarter, where we were forced to go, under terrible circumstances. There I lived for a short time only, because we had friends who gave us fake documents; I don't know whether they were real papers under somebody else's name or they were false documents, but anyway a friend of ours, who was not Jewish, she took me out of the ghetto and I was hiding in a house of other friends of ours, until the middle of February.

Thomas: February was when the siege ended?

Beck: Yes. Exactly the 13th of February.

Thomas: Did you then experience the Soviet Army as liberating?

Beck: To me of course they were actually welcome because otherwise we would have died. On the other hand, we experienced very soon how they behaved, but I think all armies behave to a certain extent in the same way. On the other hand, of course I was only 14 so I couldn't judge. I had no imagination for such things. For me it was only: thank God, now I will see my family again, because I was alone with this alien family and this family did not know that I was Jewish, so I had to play a role, I had to go to church every morning, and I had to take the communion, and things like that.

- Thomas: How did they happen to take you? Were they old family friends?
- Beck: Their cousin, the owner of the house we were in, was an old family friend, but he did not live there. This house – or villa – was actually up on the hill in Budapest. This was a very wealthy family, the cousin, and his cousins were living there. They, with whom I was living did not know who I was.
- Thomas: But the cousin had asked them to take you?
- Beck: Yes, as a refugee from the already occupied territories. So I had to be, at the age of 14, a girl from a small town in the country who would know how to cook and so on and so on. I had no idea what to do but I had to think and act.
- Thomas: Was this part of family life or were you sort of considered a servant?
- Beck: No, no, it was part of family life. There was a girl of about my age, the daughter, of the cousin, she was one year older, and we did everything together. I was not considered a servant.
- Thomas: I guess in the years after the end of the war, the first years, '45-'48, life was much, much better. This was before the Communists took over, so life was much better.
- Beck: Absolutely. It was much better, but the whole country was in ruins. It was in ruins, but everybody had high hopes that now we are going to have a better world.
- Thomas: And then.....
- Beck: But as far as I was concerned, I didn't mind, I was so happy that this old world and the war ended and I thought the bad world ended and a beautiful new world was coming.
- Thomas: And you did get back with your mother?
- Beck: Yes. But you know that Budapest consists of 2 parts, the Danube divides it to Buda and Pest. And Pest was liberated in January, - as my mother despite her possibilities did not come out of the Ghetto, because she was not able to lie, so she would rather stay in the Ghetto, almost starving. So she was liberated on the 18th of January 1945, while I was in Buda, we had no contact, and we didn't know about each other, nothing at all. I came home only on the 13th of February, so there were more than two months, when we didn't know about each other. (I left the Ghetto on December 4, in the belief that my mother would follow me.) And then this meeting was emotional, by that time my mother already knew that my father was dead, I did not know, and it took her a time before she told me. And then it took months, or I would say years,

when we were studying the lists of missing persons and we were expecting my brother home. (which unfortunately never happened.)

Thomas: Were you able to resume school?

Beck: Yes. I went back to the same school. Many of those who were just by circumstances joining the Jewish school went to other schools at that time, but I went back to the Jewish school. – I was absolutely without any discipline. I thought all the things which I survived, - what does the teacher know, I don't care. I was very difficult, I was at a difficult age, 15, then 16, and I reacted in this very wrong way, I didn't obey, I thought this isn't what I want.

Thomas: So presumably you didn't do very well in school.

Beck: No, absolutely not. And I even stopped, one year before the school ended, and I said I'd rather work so I went to work in a book store

Thomas: What did you do in the book store?

Beck: Well, I was trying to make friends with the books. Without any special education I was a kind of a shop-girl. But I had a very wonderful boss, he made me work and he said "While you clean the book shelves you have to read the books and read, at least the author and the title and what the flap says what is it all about, and behind the book shelves the customers are coming and you recommend to them and you ask them what they like. So he started to teach me how to run a book store. And the book trade became my whole life.

Thomas: And actually you were getting an education, learning what the books were all about. Was there any effect on you in any way, in the book shop or personally, when the regime, Rakosi and the Communist regime, came in?

Beck: Oh I was enthusiastic about it. I had no doubts that this was the right way to go.

Thomas: Had you before that time had any studying or learning about the Communist ideology?

Beck: No. At that time I started in this book shop to learn what it is, and I read the works of Marx and Engels and Lenin and the others, and I was absolutely convinced that this was the right way.

Thomas: Were you involved in any of the party organizations?

Beck: Yes, I joined the party at the age of 15. And even when these terrible trials started, the Rajk show trial and others, (this was a whole series), I was upset and I was crying every day because, not because I thought that something unjust was happening, but I was desolated that it turns out that this man and

many others whom I respected so much, are “enemies” and spies, and I believed everything.

Thomas: That’s what they wanted you to do.

Beck: Yes, absolutely. And it took me about 4 or 5 years until my mind started to clear up and see.....

Thomas: That would be until about?

Beck: I would say in the first Imre Nagy government, which was in ’53-’54. That was when I had the impression already that something was not quite right.

Thomas: And so when the revolution occurred?

Beck: Oh then I was already considered in the company where I worked as the “voice of free Europe”!

Thomas: Did you participate in any way?

Beck: Not actively. At that time I was already in a foreign trading company, I was working at a book export company, and I only talked a lot.

Thomas: That got you into trouble?

Beck: Not really, but a little bit. I was considered as “unreliable”.

Thomas: But you were not jailed when Kadar came in?

Beck: No

Thomas: So how did you feel at the end of the revolution?

Beck: This was absolutely a tragedy. I was already married at that time, my husband was an engineer, and we went the same road, it’s only that he woke up a little earlier than I did, and we had lots of discussions. - When I would say isn’t it a tragedy that X or Y is a spy, he would say how do we know he is. - This was in the early ‘50’s. He was not involved in the revolution and not hurt although he also was regarded as “unreliable”.

On the 23rd of October, I was there at the demonstrations with colleagues from my office and it turned out later that my husband went there too with colleagues from his office. (Actually a factory). I was at the Kossuth Square (at the Parliament) demonstration. There I already heard saying that at the radio there was shooting. I didn’t like this, and at that point I decided I would go to my mother’s, she lived in Kossuth Square, so I went there and I didn’t go home, we talked on the telephone with my husband. I remained there, and

we saw in the very early dawn of the 4th of November how the Soviet tanks came in and how they surrounded the Parliament, and we were sitting there two minutes from the Parliament, it was really frightening, all the cannons pointed at us, into our windows.

[Silence]

Thomas: How did you feel about Kadar, when he took over?

Beck: When he took over I thought it was a tragedy, he was a traitor, all the more so that 2 days earlier, - which was denied afterwards all the time, - 2 days earlier he held a speech saying what a wonderful revolution it is. But this was denied for the next 30 or so years. Two days earlier! That was a terrible disappointment. Everyone thought that something would come out of it. He was in my opinion absolutely a traitor to our cause. But later on I thought that he was very skillful. After the first few years of revenge, I would say at the beginning of the '60's, after he executed and killed all those whom he considered dangerous from his point of view, he was very clever and skillful to keep a balance. Of course everybody knew what happened to Imre Nagy and the others, but I and many others did not know that hundreds of people who participated in the revolution were killed. There were rumors, and also facts: some friends disappeared for certain periods of time and then they came out, they were taken to prison and released, they were taken and released, this lasted until I would say '63. And then a completely new time started, where you got a passport every 3 years, you could travel, etc..

Thomas: How did that affect you, in your work, in your daily life?

Beck: Well, I had my work. At that time everybody who wanted to work could get a job, except those who really actively defied, but others who were so to say passive, could work. But we just did our work. In '63 this meant that we could get a passport and travel; the first trip we made was to Italy, - \$70 per person, 30 days, you can't imagine the circumstances! (laughter)

Thomas: How did you compare what you saw in Italy with things back home, that is, here?

Beck: At that time, in Italy especially, this is '63, we went to see only the sites, tourist sites, so we had no real contact with their life. We saw of course there was a much greater collection of goods available, but this didn't really affect us, we knew exactly the difference between the systems.

Thomas: You knew there was a difference and what it was?

Beck: Absolutely.

Thomas: Did you know before you went to Italy? How did you know?

Beck: Somehow one knew. Several friends of ours went away in '56, and there were some years at the beginning when they said it was not very easy for them, when we had no contact with them, but at the beginning of the '60's we started a correspondence with them, and somebody talked to somebody, and so you know there were contacts, so we knew exactly.

Thomas: Well, I had someone tell me that when she went to Paris she was very impressed with the lights being on, it was a bright city and Budapest was dark. Somebody else went to England and said that London looked like a city that had never had a war whereas the castle in Budapest was still not repaired. Did you notice something like that in Italy?

Beck: Not so much in Italy, but in the same year I went to my first English trip, to London, and there I went to Trafalgar Square, and I could hardly believe that this could happen to me, that I am in Trafalgar Square, it was so fantastic and unbelievable. Because in the years before, (the years before or after the war), it was so to say natural, that in this country we are locked in, and that's it. This little piece of the door opened for that moment, it was fantastic.

Thomas: Greater differences in England than in Italy?

Beck: Absolutely. But the situation of my visit to Italy was very different than to England because in Italy I was a tourist, which meant that I went to see St. Peter's cathedral and this cathedral and this museum. But in England I was, so to say, closer to everyday life by having negotiations with other booksellers and publishers. I was working. And I was invited by many of them, (and I didn't even realize at the time what a great thing it was), they invited me to their homes, and this was really something very special at that time for somebody who comes from "behind the 'Iron Curtain'". It was very interesting.

At one of the family's, I remember they had a son about 15, and I was invited for lunch, I went in, and the boy said, "Oh, you are from Hungary." I said, "Yes." And he said, "That's so interesting, you are quite western-looking"! [laughter]

Thomas: Did you notice any greater freedom of speech or action?

Beck: As far as I'm concerned, let's put it this way: I accepted, or at least I knew, that here behind the Iron Curtain, there were certain rules which you have to keep, there are different things you cannot say, there are different things you cannot do, but once you accept these borderlines, and you don't cross them, then your life is normal. For those who try to say something against the system or something against the Soviet Union, that was the absolutely untouchable subject. The other thing, which is very important, it depended very much on the close surrounding where you worked or where you talked. If you had just one colleague who wanted to do you harm, then you had to be

careful, so you had to know in front of whom you may speak more freely and in front of whom you have to shut your mouth.

Thomas: And you learned this.

Beck: Absolutely. I was lucky, because in my surroundings my colleagues were all, you know, in this foreign trading company, book export, books, periodicals, music sheets, export-import, everybody had to learn languages, which meant that my colleagues were already selected, in a way, because generally not everybody spoke foreign languages.

Thomas: Did that mean that those who spoke foreign languages had access to information?

Beck: Yes, and they had a different background. The other point is that I was lucky that my bosses were always much more interested in the production I could give, than in what I spoke.

Thomas: They were more interested in how you did your job than in what you thought?

Beck: Exactly. This was very important, very fortunate. There were certain ranks in the company. You couldn't be, let's say, a general manager unless you were a party member. But you could be head of a department or a director of a bigger part if you were not a party member. But the structure of the society or of the system was such that in a company, the party committee of the territory had word in what was happening in the firm, so when I was named in the first place in '69 as head of department, - that was a problem. I had a not very good background since I came from a let's say upper middle class family (with no party members) and I said things that were not very conforming, so they said this was not all right.

Thomas: Who said that?

Beck: The party committee of the district. My boss immediately named someone else, in another department, so he kept balance.

Thomas: But he didn't remove you.

Beck: He wanted to get the work done.

Thomas: So he was hiring a good worker not a party ideologue. Did that export-import company import work that the party might consider questionable ideologically?

Beck: Absolutely. A big amount of books has been imported. Hungary was the only country in the Soviet bloc where the libraries, institutions and to a certain extent, but only to a certain extent, book shops could order books like these.

There were some books which were excluded. Pornography was one, - no pornography. Where were the lines between pornography and else, - you know, this is always a question. There were books which were very opposite, very right-wing we would say today, they were not allowed, but if a library was interested, a research library wanted these books, this was permitted.

Thomas: Even if they were anti-Communist?

Beck: Yes. But this was not on the book shelves, this was only for the library. In the libraries there were the so-called "restricted areas" (closed for the public) where only research people or only selected people could get hold of them.

Thomas: You no longer worked in the book shop, you worked in the export-import firm. But these books were not available in the book shops.

Beck: Many of these books were not available in the book shops, but the most important works of world literature were available. At that time most outstanding literature like Arthur Miller, you know, all distinguished literature. And also many of them were translated and published here in Hungarian, there was a special publishing house which published translations and this was also unique in the "socialist bloc".

Thomas: So they would publish as you say, I mean they would import, writers like Arthur Miller or Kerouac. What about magazines and newspapers?

Beck: Well, these were only restricted, these were imported, the newspapers were restricted mainly for hotels where foreign guests stayed, they were not for resale in the ordinary book stores.

Thomas: In the ordinary book stores you wouldn't find the New York Times or Time Magazine.

Beck: Maybe in one or two special book shops. There was a so-called foreign language book store in the city where you could maybe find one of these papers. But the time we are talking now it was already in the '70's.

Thomas: So it was restricted still in the '70's.

Beck: Yes, the normal daily press. A few copies were available so that it shouldn't be said that there was censorship.

Thomas: To get around the accusation of censorship. And what about you? Did you have the opportunity to see the New York Times?

Beck: YES. I could have gone to the restricted sections in book stores, I could have for my personal use, but I would rather get hold of some book, I'd rather read

some good literature like Orwell or Koestler. I remember it was a big thing, in 1984, there was a big article about Orwell's book.

Thomas: This was published in the Hungarian press? But the book was not available in the normal book stores. So selected persons who could read the language could get it, but it was very limited. But you personally still knew what was going on in the world outside.

Beck: Well, of course we, the professional people got Publishers Weekly and the Bookseller, and the German Börsenblatt, which are the periodical issues of the book world which included of course many other disciplines.

Thomas: That would convey information about more than just books.

Beck: We knew everything.

Thomas: But it was possible as you said to live within these rules. Generally speaking that was what you did, what everybody did.

Beck: Actually everybody did, and after, I would say the beginning of the '60's, '63, '64, only those were constantly persecuted who didn't accept the rules, who openly didn't accept the rules, they were I would say in the range of hundreds.

Thomas: And then, I have understood from others, that living standards got much better as time went on. So you could live within the rules and have economically and socially a good life.

Beck: Yes. Of course not great wealth, but it was normal for a family of our size that one had, most of the people had second homes, a little house here and a little weekend house as it was called, it wasn't called a home, on the land or somewhere. We didn't have one because we didn't want to have, we would rather spend our money for traveling than having a second home. Anybody could have a car but only a so-called socialist car, of course, which meant manufactured in the east block, and you had to wait for about two years to get it. You had to pay advance money, and enlist yourself, and then you got a car. We bought our first car in '70. Then you had to immediately enlist for the next car because it took another 2, 3, 4, 5 years to get it.

Thomas: The next one would be a second car?

Beck: No. It would be because.....

Thomas: The first one would wear out. So where else did you travel? And did you travel by car?

Beck: Yes. Our family traveled together and our first big trip was in 1970 when we got our first car, which was a Polish Fiat, the Poles manufactured on a Fiat

license somehow. We took our first big trip which was to Austria, Germany, Holland, Belgium, France, Italy. This was \$70 a person, that is what we could buy for Hungarian Forints at the Bank and my son who was a child got \$5 extra. We stayed in camps, we took a tent with us, and we took lots of food with us, salami and tinned foods and so on, and cooked things, it was absolutely wonderful. The passport allowed you to be abroad for 30 days, if you were not entering the country on the thirtieth day, that was trouble, they would seize your passport, there would be a trial, and so forth. So we came back to Austria and it was raining terribly, and we said: what shall we do, we can't do much in this pouring rain, so we counted our money and said, well, if we could find a cheap hotel we could stay one more day, and we found one, went in, and my son said "Look at this, a white bed!" He hadn't seen one for 30 days! (laughter)

Thomas: Someone told me that you could only go where you said you would go, it had to be told ahead of time that you were going to-----

Beck: You had to get a visa for every country. So if you planned a trip you had to plan months in advance, you had to fill out papers, many pages, to get visas, the Austrian, the German, the Dutch, the Belgian, the French, the Italian visa, it took a long time, in order to step in twice, on the way out and on the way back, (like Austria in our case) it was a big administrative undertaking.

Thomas: And you could only do that every 3 years.

Beck: Yes. But in the meantime you could travel in the so-called socialist block, for which you had a different passport. Once we went to east Germany because our company had an exchange program with an east German company. They had a summer resort somewhere in the North part of the country and in this exchange frame you had therefore 2 weeks there. And we also went to Yugoslavia.

Thomas: I'm wondering if, since you stayed in camps, you had less experience of contact with people in Germany, Austria, Belgium, France.

Beck: Very true, unless you had acquaintances which we had in Vienna, or had in Holland, we had friends living there and there we met, in the city or in the camp.

Thomas: Who was traveling in the camps? Who did you meet in the camps?

Beck: You saw in the camps all kinds of nationalities, there were many Hungarians, but we never had friendships with them in the camp. But at the time it was absolutely the fashion to go to camps, and the wealthier people had live-in cars which were big cars with all the equipment in them for camp living. We cooked only outside, on the grounds, so to speak, we had a gas stove but just a small one.

- Thomas: Were the other people traveling in the camps from the east bloc, or were there Germans and Italians and so forth?
- Beck: Oh yes, many, it was absolutely international. So once we were in Yugoslavia for two weeks. And then the other big trip we took with friends of ours we went to Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria. When we spent 3 days in Istanbul, it happened that there was no water in the camp. Can you imagine? They brought water in buckets. There was some running water but you couldn't drink it, you had to boil it. And in Istanbul where it never cools down! The terrible thing was that we were at the seashore, and the sea was full of jellyfish, so you couldn't bathe! And the temperature was over 40° Celsius.
- Thomas: Yuk! When you went to cities like Istanbul you still stayed in camps?
- Beck: Yes. We really didn't have any money to spend for hotels. We could go every third year only, so we calculated our trips so that the 30 days should be 30 days, not less.
- Thomas: So your vacations were 30 day vacations. So what differences did you notice that made an impression on you between life or experiences in Hungary and that in other countries?
- Beck: Well, it depends upon what country. The whole situation was completely different. The shops, for instance, they were simply different, and much wider, the selection, the items. On these trips we mostly concentrated on the marginal sides of life, for instance in Turkey and Greece, there was the traffic, how people drove, and everywhere there were many more cars. My husband was very good at recognizing the Hungarian groups or families from 100 meters, partly by their dress, the quality.
- Thomas: Staying in the camps I would guess that you didn't have access perhaps to the press, the media. Did you have any experience of any difference from the media in Hungary?
- Beck: Well, as far as television was concerned, we had no comparison because I was very much against television at that time. Our own TV set came only in about 1974-75! . But on the radio and in press reports., there was absolutely a difference. We knew already beforehand because we listened to other than Hungarian radio stations. Personally I didn't much like Radio Free Europe, because it was always one-angled in Hungary, that is, but I listened sometimes to London and sometimes to German radio stations, so one knew exactly beforehand what the press would say. We didn't pay much attention to radio and the press on our trips. In East Germany, when we were there or I was there on business, we noticed something. In Hungary, there were always many political jokes, which everybody knew and everybody told, it was not permitted but it was not punished, it was something in between. This was in conversation. In East Germany the first thing when you spoke to an East

German, the first question was, “Do you have any jokes?” They didn’t, they wanted to hear our political jokes. There was one: what is the difference between a dog here or there? Here he has more salami to eat but there he may bark.

Thomas: So tell me what happened in ‘89. Did you see this coming?.

Beck: No. I don’t believe anybody who says they saw it coming. When it was there then you saw already, but nobody saw it was going to happen. Economically one had bad feelings, one could feel that there are problems but they, the government, would solve them. Politically one had the feeling, rather knowledge, that the western powers had an agreement with the Soviet Union: this is your territory, you may do what you want. It was true in ’56 that this was the fact, and it was true in ’68 when the red army with the Hungarian army (and all other Eastern Bloc armies, except Rumania) marched into Prague, which was the biggest shock, a greater shock than ’56, that it may happen again, and there is no end to it, that was a terrible shock. I remember very well, we were on holiday and we heard this news the next morning and we couldn’t recover it was such a shock, and even more of a shock that Hungarian troops were involved. – When Imre Nagy was reburied, then it was already clear that something was happening politically, but only at that time. This was June 1989.

Thomas: What was your reaction when it happened?

Beck: Well, I can tell you frankly, I had mixed feelings. A joke comes into my mind- (the Hungarian political life is full of jokes): a certain Jewish gentleman wants to emigrate and goes to the ministry, - this is during the Kadar era, - and asks for an emigration passport, and the official asks, “Why do you want to go away?” And he said, “Look, there are two reasons: if the Russians leave the country, then anti-Semitism will return here.” And then the official replied: “But the Russians don’t leave the country” “This is the other reason”. (laughter)

So anyway, there was a great feeling of freeing things but there was a shadow on it, whether the past comes back. Of course people are cautious, not knowing which line will succeed and what will be the right thing to say. I think the majority of people were for the change, I think the majority were happy to have something new, mainly because they thought they could make more money, which was absolutely mistaken.

Thomas: So they expected economically to profit. Yes, I have heard that people were absolutely euphoric.

Beck: Yes. But this again, like in ’56, a part of the people wanted, I’m talking about ’56, a really democratic socialism, the other part of the people wanted to have a change of the system. This was a mixture, because at that point during those

days everybody wanted a change but they wanted different changes, in different directions. It was a little bit similar in '89. There was one thing in common: everybody thought it was good to get rid of the Russians. But on the other hand people didn't dream of having unemployment, or work places not existing anymore. They were more optimistic, the majority of the people only saw that we are getting rid of something wrong.

Thomas: And how did you feel?

Beck: In the company where I worked for 35 years, I felt that something was deteriorating. Many new people come in who don't want to work, they wanted to make their own career without putting in something. Everybody wants to pick up something of the company, which had been a state-owned company, of course, and people want to cut out things for their own but not to produce anything in return. That's why I retired.

Thomas: You felt people had this attitude when the changes came, not earlier.

Beck: That's right, because earlier there was no hope to get there, it was not realistic to try to get part of a state-owned company.

Thomas: But in the latter years of the Kadar era some people could set up small private companies.

Beck: Yes, but not foreign trade. Foreign trade was always a state monopoly, it was sacred. The method and means to make it impossible was that the Hungarian forint was not convertible, so in order to get hold of dollars or German marks or anything you had to go to the national bank, and that was the end of it. And in the foreign trade company, we had a certain allocation every year, we had a certain amount of dollars or whatever which we were allowed to spend for our imports. It was absolutely regulated.

Thomas: Do you think that perhaps you personally were more ambivalent about the change because you had seen some changes in '45, '46, and '48 that did not work out, you'd been through some tough times?

Beck: Maybe this is true. I was certainly not enthusiastic about the collapse of the Communist regime. I did not think that it would end up in fantastic times, some people did.

Thomas: And how do you think it's gone since then?

Beck: I think it's the wrong moment to ask the question since now the whole world is in trouble and Hungary is absolutely in trouble. It's a different answer now than it would have been 4 years ago. But looking at it before this year, I think in many aspects it was very positive. To make it very simple, it turned out quite clearly that the so-called socialist system did not work. There was no

choice, really, because it didn't work, economically, politically, socially, all ways. This is not the question. The question was, how did it go at first. What I felt, everybody knew that, for instance, unemployment, which is so very important, belonged to the other civilization system, as it used to belong to Communist campaigning. Now I say, which I don't think I said at that time but now I say, that permanent development of the economy is impossible, there must be ups and downs, I don't believe in the permanent going-up as I see it now.

But also at that time I already saw the change of opinion of the same person. You mentioned Pozsgay, whom many people accepted. I think he is the very best example of what we call switching. At that time when he already knew, being very much up in the hierarchy, that it's over, then he said that 1956 was a "people's uprising", not a counterrevolution. But beforehand he was one of the most powerful Communist leaders. When he became the minister of culture, to which ministry our company belonged, we were trembling what he would do. And there are many of these people, whom we call "coat-turning".

Thomas: I have heard, I don't know whether it's true, that many of the top people in the Communist regime were able because of their position to profit from the change, they could buy, early on, state-owned properties and sell them at a profit.

Beck: Yes, economically. I saw that in my own company. That's why I left, I hated this, some of the top people making use of their position.

Thomas: And that in turn, because of financial profit, placed them as moneyed people in positions of influence and power in the new situation.

Beck: Exactly.

Thomas: I have also heard that the country is very divided. I guess you would say socially and politically, because everybody expects their own problems to be solved, everybody feels they were victimized in the past, the Jews were victimized by the Nazis, others were victimized by the Communists, everybody wants to recover whatever they lost and they can't, everybody has an ax to grind, people don't work together toward a common goal. It makes it difficult to govern yourself when you're always at odds with each other. Would you agree with that?

Beck: Yes. I think this is one of the big problems. Another aspect is---it is very often mentioned---that Hungarians were not able to confront themselves with their own past.

Which the Germans amazingly did. In Hungary this did not happen. When you think about reimbursement or pay-back, there is not one single person in the country who in one or another period of time wouldn't be a victim.

Everybody was a victim, it depends when. We are not able to say, this is past, let's forget and try to build up a new country. I envied America so much at this election when Obama won and MacCain stood up and said, "I lost", and people in his audience started to boo Obama, and he said, "No, from now on we are working together." This country is not able to do that. From a certain point you have to stop trying to win over the other and be a winner and make the other a loser. We are not able to do something together.

Thomas: Confronting the past may mean 2 things. It may mean remembering the past, which I get the impression too many Hungarians remember how they were ill-treated. But confronting the past can also mean admitting your guilt in certain situations, and I suppose when you say we're not confronting the past you mean they're not admitting that everybody was a victim, and this has happened and now we have to work together and get on with it. Is that what you mean by confronting the past?

Beck: Absolutely. Many people would never admit that they could lead an innocent and quiet period of time in the so-called Communism. On the other hand, for another period, people would not admit that they at least were silent or even made use of the extinction of Jews. You know, we all have our smaller-bigger sins, but everybody looks at the other as if only he had, and the other person is absolutely innocent. "I am the victim, and I was nothing, not in a position to do harm to anybody." Everybody is inclined to say. I'm grateful that when the worst things happened, I was very young. I admit the possibility that if I had been asked, let's say in '48, to do something because X or Y is a spy, I would have done it. It's my luck that this situation never came into being.

Thomas: So what you're saying is that everybody was a victim of something, and everybody was a victimizer.

Beck: Yes, to a certain extent.

Thomas: Yes, some greater, some lesser, but everybody. And this is what they can't admit, they can take on the role of victim but they can't admit to causing others to be victims. This is very difficult. What is the solution?

Beck: I don't know, I don't know. In this connection, at the present time on the international scene I don't know whether you have heard about the problems with Slovakia which we are having now. It is true that for a long period of time Hungary was a much bigger country than it is now. But this is not only because these poor Hungarians were not compensated, or were robbed. Hungary took part in two world wars on the wrong side, this has consequences, and it is terrible, and for the people who live in these areas, which have been taken away, it's a tragedy. My daughter-in-law comes from Transylvania, and she knows very well, and it's really a tragedy for them, I admit. But we cannot act as if this wouldn't have had reasons.

- Thomas: The cause is here. By the Hungarians.
- Beck: By the Hungarians. First of all, the old Roman saying says the loser has to bear the consequences. "Woe to the vanquished" Two times there were wrong political decisions, in two world wars. I don't say that it would have been easy to decide in a different way, because geographically Hungary is in such a place that there are not many possibilities to move in this area.. But it doesn't lead anywhere to say to Slovakia , whatever we may feel inside, that they are only a temporary state and they have no right to have their own state. .
- Thomas: It's so hard to admit guilt, I sympathize with the Hungarians. But there is also the practical matter. When I was here a few years ago there was an election, a vote in Hungary whether or not to grant citizenship in Hungary to Hungarians, people of Hungarian descent, living in other political states. I did not understand how this could even come up for a vote because practically how could that work? It was not voted, was it?
- Beck: It was not voted, it was rejected. Since then, some Hungarian organizations outside Hungary are very hurt, very upset, how the Hungarians could reject these Hungarians.
- Thomas: There's a failure to face the facts of life.
- Beck: Which are hard, I admit, they are very hard, and emotionally it was very difficult to accept.
- Thomas: But one has to admit that life is not fair, and there is nothing much to do about it except to help those who are most afflicted by it. I have wondered too if one of the difficulties is the quality of the leadership here. I do not know how leaders arise, but at times in history certain countries have been very fortunate in their leadership. I think you could say this of England with Winston Churchill, who said that the Brits were going to have to suffer blood, sweat and tears at that time, and I think so far that we are fortunate in the United States to have a man like Obama arise who is saying in effect, enough of this quarreling among ourselves, we have to come together to change things. Do you think that this is a problem in Hungary, that perhaps the leadership is lacking?
- Beck: I think that is very true. I think a moral basis is lacking. I tell you why I'm thinking this. There are all the time and especially nowadays problems with incomes, in Hungary especially very much so but everywhere. Now we say that the state has to pay more attention not to spend too much money, which is fine. Now there are the members of Parliament who have their salaries as members of Parliament. Most of them have second and third jobs in the Parliament there are members or presidents of different special committees, or they are in different areas in the local community centers. Plus apart from all this they have a certain amount for expenses, which would be all right, but

they are not compelled to make account ever for what they spend here. Can you imagine that? And this is so. Now what moral standard is that, when the leading three hundred people of the country get money as much as they want and they have no commitment to make any account of their expenses. And this is outside, plus their salaries.

- Thomas: Why don't the Hungarian people demand legislation requiring accounting?
- Beck: They did and the Parliament voted it down because they would be losing something. This is such a moral standard. This is unbearable.
- Thomas: But one would think that at the next election all those people would be turned out.
- Beck: Then the next bunch comes and they do the same thing. This is the one and only issue, in which all representatives of all parties agree!!!
- Thomas: Well, that is a problem.
- Beck: This is a problem and this shows the moral standard. When the first three hundred people show this example for the country, what do you expect from the rest?
- Thomas: Doesn't somebody object?
- Beck: Everybody objects, but they are in power and they vote against.
- Thomas: And when you elect new representatives to the Parliament they become corrupt and expect this? That seems like a fundamental ethical problem.
- Beck: Absolutely. And then if this goes down, it works in my opinion as an example, even if you don't say it it is an emotional attitude, everybody thinks if he's making that why should I pay taxes, everybody lies when it comes to taxes. In America this is unbelievable. [News of to-day: the members of the Parliament \(2/3 majority\) voted in favor of introducing new rules to account for all of their expenses and pay tax after all their incomes. June 30. 2009.](#)
- Thomas: Well, everybody tries to get out of taxes.
- Beck: That's true, but they have their rules for that.
- Thomas: Yes, and there are laws that make you accountable. I'm sure some people get away with murder, as we say. But the system tries very hard to prevent that.
- Beck: But you have a system. In my opinion this is a very important problem. And the other in my opinion is that contrary to America, here there is a constant campaign going on, a constant campaign.

- Thomas: What do you mean?
- Beck: Well, in America when there is an election there is a campaign for a certain period of time going on and each candidate campaigns for himself and then it's over. Everybody accepts the results of the elections. – Here once the election is done the campaign is not over. It's not so public and it's not overwhelming. Behind the curtain certain things are going on, I know, I'm not so idealistic, I know that under the surface things go on, in America too, we are all like this. But here the right wing simply says that the socialist government and everybody who is socialist or left-thinking or liberal, is not Hungarian, they are foreign, foreign-hearted people, and this goes on and on.
- Thomas: I have heard this, that people are not pulling together, everybody is fighting everybody else, and that they are demonizing the other side, they're the ones that are bad and they are really bad. I have heard that it will take a generation or two before the victimization is forgotten and the negative results of divisiveness are apparent until people, another generation will work together, which doesn't give a lot of hope at this particular time. I don't know if this is true or not.
- Beck: Yes I think this is true. On the other side, the majority of young people, who are the future, they despise politics, and not without reason, I might say. They don't care. I think about my grandson and even my son, my grandson is 28, he is not interested in politics.
- Thomas: I have the feeling that when you get old enough, you see that politics really affects you, it affects how you live, how much you can eat, how much you can say, when you find that out you suddenly get involved in politics. But he's old enough to have discovered that.
- Beck: I absolutely agree, but he is still not interested. And many others, my niece also, she is older than my grandson and they are friends, they consider politics as something that is outside their interest, which in my opinion is the wrong approach, it is simply not true, it affects you in every way.
- Thomas: Yes, it affects you in every way. I hear this in America too, but somehow we get sucked into politics. It is just a great passion in America. I didn't go into politics, never wanted to go into politics but I can't help but vote, I can't help but be interested.
- Beck: Our votes are the only direct possibility to be involved.
- Thomas: Yes, although you can work for a political party.
- Beck: I didn't want to do that. I don't want to be involved that way.

- Thomas: Sometimes I think things have to get to a certain degree of horribleness, a certain degree of awful, before everybody rallies together. I'm prejudiced of course, but I think I see this happening in my country recently. The policies of the Bush administration gradually alienated many people so much and annoyed people so that there was a real surge of opinion against continuing things as they were and this was seen in the last election. Now it is quite incredible, the euphoria. Not since John F. Kennedy have I seen this feeling that there is a future after all and the hope and the desire to work for it.
- Beck: I think that there is a great deal for Obama to do at this time.
- Thomas: Oh it is a terrible time, but that's the way it is, and people have enormous hope now. And everyone, even the press, says it will take a long time to set things straight, he's got a terrible job, it's going to get worse maybe before it gets better, but there is hope. I think there is some realism about it.
- Beck: Well, it's very interesting, we have many friends in America, and some are enthusiastic Republicans, which I don't understand. To tell you one example, there is one friend of ours who was a school chum, a very old friend, and sometimes we talk on the phone, and after Obama has been elected, we called them and we said congratulations. And he said, Congratulations for what? We knew that they were Republicans and they liked George W. Bush, and then he said: Look, we survived Hitler, we survived Stalin, (Communism,) and we will survive Obama. We were stunned.
- Thomas: I would think you would be stunned. Well, of course, everybody can't be happy. That's impossible.
- Beck: No, but I think his comment is not fair, to group them together. I was hoping for our generation at least this divisiveness would be avoided, because we've had several things already, we've had enough.
- Thomas: Yes, you've had enough already. Two things I wanted to ask you: where and when did you learn English, especially so fluently, and when did you go to America?
- Beck: I learned English already when I was very young. My mother was very keen on having the children educated to learn languages and many things, ballet, gymnastics. I am always surprised at the children nowadays who complain how much they have to work at school. Besides school, I learned English, and I learned French, and I learned piano, and I learned special gymnastics, and I learned ballet, and I had still time for everything, skating and swimming and so forth.
- Thomas: You didn't learn English then in school?

- Beck: Some, but that was not the main point, I had a private teacher, twice a week for an hour, and homework to do. In school you cannot learn a language. It is very typical: in Hungary. E.g. Russian was compulsory for many decades, everybody learned Russian and nobody speaks Russian.
- Thomas: Everybody tells me they can't speak Russian, they've taken it for ten years but they can't speak Russian. They can read a little. I thought maybe it was because they didn't want to speak Russian after having to.
- Beck: Yes, there was a counter feeling. But at school even other languages, French, or Italian, etc. fail.-I think there must be something wrong with language teaching in Hungary because at school you can never learn a language.
- Thomas: It's the same thing in the United States. I think to learn a language you have to be using it. But you speak such excellent English you must have used it.
- Beck: Yes, I used it in my work. I spoke and corresponded with English publishers and American publishers. As far as going to America, I was in America for the first time in '68 on a business trip, which was a very hard time, it was after Martin Luther King was killed. It was very interesting. I was alone. In many cases on business trips there were two people, this one was on my own. It's true that at this time there were not many foreign traders traveling to America, so the Hungarian embassy had a special New York section and they took care of me, they booked my hotel, it was a beautiful hotel but a room smaller than a stateroom (box). Whenever anyone asked me where I stayed and I say "the St. Moritz" they are impressed. (laughter)
- Thomas: Yes, of course. Were you just in New York?
- Beck: No, I went to Princeton, etc.-I went to towns where there were publishing connections. I was in Cleveland, Toledo, (Ohio), because of the Hungarians there, and I was in Washington and in Boston.
- Thomas: There's a large Hungarian population in New Brunswick.
- Beck: I wasn't there but I have friends who are there now and they teach there. I was in Washington and I remember, whenever I arrived I had to call the embassy, and a very nice gentleman told me, "Don't go alone anywhere. Take a taxi "
- Thomas: You mean in the daytime or at night?
- Beck: Any time, any time. That was when the students and black people led by rev. Abernathy were marching. To protest Martin Luther King's murder. It was a rather upset time. And apart from all this there was a strike of the bus drivers, and they had their meeting in the very hotel I stayed in in Washington!

Thomas: Washington has a lot of demonstrations, as you might expect. Well, tell me, is there anything else you would like to say, on the subject of the Kadar regime or the post-Kadar period?

Beck: There may be one remark I might add. There is now a fashion here to say you have to choose whether you choose Kadar or Imre Nagy.. I think this is completely wrong. This is mainly for the socialist party, they have to make that choice, which way they move. But this is a very complicated issue: both of them went long ways, and changed a lot as times went by.

Thomas: And what do they mean by that choice? Between strict? That Kadar was not like Rakosi?

Beck: No. Kadar was a change from Rakosi.

Thomas: Of course. And Nagy was a Communist but I gather he was a reformer or capable of it.

Beck: He was a Communist but it took him several years I think before he became a reformer, and I think in my eyes he made very serious mistakes at that time. The fact that he is now idealized, this is only because of his human behavior. He chose to die. Because he could have signed only one paper: his resignation. Kadar asked him to sign that he resigned, because this would have made Kadar's position legal. And this he didn't do. This signature would have saved his life.

Thomas: This is after Kadar came into power and after Kadar, that is to say, somebody had captured Nagy.

Beck: This was the only condition. Nobody knows what would have happened if he had signed. But as a matter of fact he never signed, he said no, I am the leader of my people.

He knew exactly how the system worked, and he knew exactly what he was doing, and he decided to die.

Thomas: So when they say you've got to be either Kadar or Nagy, what do they mean/

Beck: They mean that you want to go the old way, Kadar's, which was not a very strict dictatorship but still a dictatorship, based on the Soviet system - or you want to make the reforms. I find this division false, in my opinion, this is not the question. You have to leave out the whole socialist system of the way of thinking today. I have many problems with the present system, and I think socially it is very unjust. There are so many very, very poor people who just can't help themselves. And on the other side there is a bunch of people who are too wealthy. (just unnecessary). I'm for the differences and I'm absolutely for the system that if somebody is more skillful and more talented than he or

she should make more money and should be better off, of course. But the old age pensioners, there are many of those who have a pension of about \$150 a month. They don't have anything else. There was introduced a rule that the old-age pensioners receive a 13-month pension, not only a 12-month pension. Now the new rule is that those who have more pension than, let's say \$100 a month, they don't get the 13th-month pension. And on the other hand there are people who make several millions monthly. I feel it's unjust. But one must never forget that the other system went bankrupt, it did not work, it's finished, one has to forget it. We have to find out something to make this system work better.

Thomas: And the question of what that system would be is as yet unclear.

Beck: Yes, absolutely. Well, you know, here there is a big discussion nowadays about taxes, whether we have to increase or decrease taxes. If we expect from the state to insure the health care, the old-age pension, and so forth and so forth and so forth, then we have to pay taxes. To say I don't want to pay taxes but the state should be responsible for this that and the other, is irresponsible.

Thomas: Absolutely.

[End of Interview]