

An Interview with Peter Bihari

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

Interviews conducted by  
Virginia Major Thomas  
in 2007

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## **Discursive Table of Contents—Peter Bihari**

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## **Biography**

Peter Bihari is a history teacher in a high school (gymnasium) in Budapest and the author of *The History of the 20th Century* (Budapest: Holnap Kiado, 1991). He comes from an assimilated Jewish family, and his parents were middle class Communist party members with no deep ideological commitment to Communism. He notes the absence of political discussion in his family, especially about the Holocaust, but his grandfather made occasional critical remarks about the Kadar regime which his grandson heard and remembers. Peter recalls the Kadar years of the 1970's and 1980's as better than earlier years but by the late '80's he was convinced the system was unworkable. During his year in the military (the question about what he did in the army he calls a "hard question"), he became friends with Hungarians from other educational and economic backgrounds and counts this a very valuable social experience. After that he went to the university. During his university career he spent 4 months at the University of Jena in East Germany, met students from Russia and other east European countries there, and with his companions memorably saw West German state television when it showed election debates. Upon graduation he became a high school history teacher and continued this after he got a PhD in Hungarian history at Central European University. He finds life in Hungary after '89 quite different than earlier and presents an insightful critique of current social, political and economic conditions in Hungary today. He is not optimistic about the future but sees achievements Hungary can be proud of, both present and past, especially its contributions to world culture. He assisted the historian and news correspondent Kati Marton in preparations for her recent book *The Great Escape*.

## **Circumstances of Interview with Peter Bihari on November 25, 2007**

The interview with Peter Bihari took place at Csorsc utca 5 in Budapest, Hungary on November 25, 2007 with Jakobffy Miklos present, although his translation skills were not needed. Peter Bihar is a cousin of friends of the interviewer; these friends had written to him from the United States to "introduce" the interviewer and explain the project to him. Peter and the interviewer met in Budapest once before the interview was conducted. As Peter speaks excellent English, no translation was required. He was most gracious and orthcoming during the interview.

## **Editing of the interview**

The interview was transcribed by the interviewer with only light editing of the tape text to omit meaningless repetitions or "ah"s. Unfortunately, a faulty tape made it impossible to hear or understand a few words and sentences; these sections are indicated in the transcription with asterisks (\*). The edited transcription was then sent to Peter Bihari, and when after a deadline of about 10 months for his editing passed without any changes being made, the transcription was submitted to Bancroft Library without any alterations.

- Thomas: This is Major Thomas on November 25, 2007 at Csorsz utca 5, Budapest, Hungary, and we are interviewing Peter Bihari. We will begin, Peter, by asking you where and when you were born and a little bit about your family, your parents.
- Bihari: So I am Peter Bihari and I am past 50, I was born in 1957, so after the '56 Revolution. I know that when I was born there was curfew.
- Thomas: Meaning your parents couldn't go out in the evening?
- Bihari: Yes. In the daytime you could go out but not in the evening. I have no sisters or brothers, so I am alone. Maybe for this reason I have 3 children, it is better to have sisters and brothers, I know this in principle! I was born in Budapest and have always lived here apart from a few weeks when I was occasionally abroad. Both of my parents are sort of clerks, belonging to the middle class as it existed at that time.
- Thomas: What does it mean, clerk?
- Bihari: Well, my father was working for, not a ministry of sports, but it was a state office for sports, because he was always a good sportsman, and he was always interested in sports, and somehow after the Second World War as a young man he was asked what he would like to do, there are so many chances and so on, maybe he would like----at that time it was the Communist Party which mainly asked such questions----would he like to join the police or some such thing and he said no, thank you, but anything in connection with sports. And then he had various not so high places in this office.
- Thomas: Did he have to join the Communist Party?
- Bihari: Both of my parents were party members, as long as the party existed, until '89. I think they were very average party members. I think in the '80's this meant mostly that they knew rise in prices before the whole population and things like that.
- So it meant not much but somehow they joined and they stayed.
- Thomas: Did they believe the ideology? Did they teach it to you?
- Bihari: No. No, I think not. They had much more practical ways of thinking. On the one hand it was an assimilated Jewish family on both sides, so they felt that they must be left-wingers somehow or something like that, in order to avoid any such terrible things which happened in their youth, at the end of the war, I think this determined their way of thinking much more than they admit even now. But it didn't influence me too much. And on the other hand, they admired everything, my mother admired everything which came from the

west, mainly things she saw when she happened to be outside Hungary, in Vienna, it was like paradise, you could get everything\*\*\*\*\*

Thomas: They could travel outside Hungary?

Bihari: My father traveled a lot, even in the dark '50's, because of sports, when nobody could travel he did, very frequently. I remember I spent half of my life at stations and airports waiting for him, I was waiting with my mother, and that must have been some influence on his thinking, although he didn't speak foreign languages, he spoke a little German, I don't know how much.

Thomas: But he did travel to the west, not just to the east.

Bihari: Yes, a lot. Not to the United States because there wasn't table tennis there, but to Britain, Germany, also to the east.

Thomas: To China?

Bihari: He went to China, he went to Japan, he went to India, to exotic places.

Thomas: Where they played table tennis.

Bihari: Yes. For instance, once he said, it's an interesting little thing, some time in the '50's, I don't know exactly when, he was in Paris, and they, as the Hungarian delegation, were taken to the cinema. So the car took them, and the car stopped at little farther away from the cinema, and the Hungarians asked, why don't we come closer? because we don't find any parking place there. And then my father came back and said, "There are so many cars in Paris that they can't find enough parking places." And then the Hungarians to whom he said that thought, well, he's coming from a foreign city, he can say whatever he wants to, but of course nobody believed him! When I was young we lived in the 13<sup>th</sup> district close to Margaret Island, and in our big block there were 2 private cars in the whole block, a really big block. One belonged to a doctor, and the other to a famous actor.

Thomas: And probably were not western-made cars.

Bihari: No, one was an Opel, I think. And our first car, which my father bought second-hand somewhere in Germany, was a Volkswagen, an old Volkswagen. It was in the mid-'60's. I remember these things, when we bought our first television, of course it was black and white, and the car, in the middle of the '60's, and I remember the first Coke, which came I think in '68, and everybody was shocked that it was so bad, at first everybody thought that it was bad, people didn't like it but they got used to it, but nobody said it was bad.

- Thomas: Did you have a sense that things got better in the '60's under Kadar, that goulash Communism was better than it was before?
- Bihari: It's hard to say because I was a boy. We didn't live very lavishly but also not bad. I remember that when my mother got bananas, which was a rarity, somehow we shared it. So there were not long queues anymore but for bananas definitely. My mother bought Coca Cola, I drank a little but I left it for her. Maybe, maybe in the '60's, at the end of the '60's and in the early '70's, we did have a feeling that things were better, and more people traveled and more freely, and so on. We went together to Italy in '69 in our small car.
- Thomas: This was like a vacation, not a business trip.
- Bihari: Yes, that's right. So definitely one can say that yes, it was better. I didn't put it that way before, I was too young to know about earlier times.
- Thomas: What was it like in school? What did you learn, and did you have any sense that there was a limitation, particularly in the study of history, a limitation of viewpoint, it was one way of viewing history as opposed to presenting several. I mean this must have been in the gymnasium, you don't study much history in elementary school.
- Bihari: I was always interested in history, in geography and history. I don't know why exactly, probably because I heard stories from my grandfather when we lived together. My grandmother died when I was 6 and then my grandfather came to live with us, a very nice old man, so I learned a lot. He was not very talkative, but still one could learn a lot from him. I don't remember too much of the elementary school, I think it was an average elementary school, in the 13<sup>th</sup> district. The gymnasium, well, it was quite a good gymnasium, called the Kolcsey Ferenc gymnasium, my older daughter attends there now, which is absolutely an accident of history, no connection, the school is near our present apartment. Well, we had quite good history teachers, but of course we had doubts too and sometimes we heard different stories at home than at school. I don't remember at school, it was the early '70's, I don't remember too much ideological input, but maybe there was and I just don't remember. One had to belong to the Pioneers and the Young Communists organization but they didn't demand anything special from us.
- Thomas: I wondered if the history was taught as the story of class struggle, as opposed to presenting it as one view of history and then there are others.
- Bihari: Yes, it was, it was [taught as the history of class struggle]. But it's not only because of Communism but in eastern Europe traditionally there is only one way of seeing things, it's the Prussian model, the teacher of course knows everything and the textbook, and you just have to learn it, more or less by heart. If you know it well by heart, this one truth, and you are good. Of course it's not anymore the case.

- Thomas: That's not the way you teach.
- Bihari: It's not the way I try to teach, although many pupils even in our school demand-----well, if I may say it in brackets, many pupils want us to tell the truth in the end, so they say, well, okay, we have seen it that way and that way, but please, Mr. Teacher, tell us how it is in fact and what the truth is. They want to be sure. But that's part of another story. There was certainly some indoctrination of us in history, also in other subjects, quite certain, for instance of course we had to learn Russian, it was compulsory, in fact I was learning Russian for 10 years, even in the university I had to learn some Russian, I know very little, it was really not fashionable to learn Russian. Maybe there was even more indoctrination in Russian than in other subjects because there were readings from Lenin and such.
- Thomas: Did you have any sense that the teachers had a different point of view or disagreed with the textbooks, any hints or any reluctances that as a teenager you would have picked up on.
- Bihari: I wouldn't say that it was never open. I knew that some were true believers probably, and maybe there were one or two more skeptical. I remember one history teacher who was probably a bit more skeptical but this is only in hindsight.
- Thomas: You didn't know that at the time?
- Bihari: Not really. He looked a bit more cynical or skeptical in general, but maybe because he was older. It was not open.
- Thomas: Did you get a different view at home? Or did your folks just not talk about it?
- Bihari: There were a lot of things we didn't speak about. Some were in connection with Jewish things.
- Thomas: You didn't speak about that?
- Bihari: Almost nothing. Sometimes something came up, mostly when my father was together with his sister, what happened in the war, who was where, who escaped harm and so forth, these happened but only in some little stories, this happened. My grandfather again was a person who always told his remarks, not very loudly, but I knew he had his own opinions about things. For instance, there was a thing about the "Counter- Revolution of 1956", and he never said that word, and when I asked him sometimes about that, in school and other places that was the official language, well, he didn't speak very openly, he just said\*\*\*\*\*useless. And again when we had a TV, the whole family would watch the news, well, he had his little remarks, for instance, on the TV it said that Comrade Kadar received the leader of the Russian troops temporarily stationed in Hungary, he asked how

temporary it was. He was born in 1896, at a time when there was greater Hungary, a quite different world. He had many problems in life, but he could not get used to this. Of course he was a pensioner, the state took care of him, but he didn't like this state very much. He always had these remarks.

Thomas: And you heard them.

Bihari: Of course I heard them, it seems that I even remember some of them. But it was not that he said something and then there was a family discussion. We knew that grandfather thought this way and that way and more or less all the others thought this way, but we didn't talk about it.

Thomas: You didn't really discuss the social and political affairs. Just out of curiosity, I wonder what you did in the Young Pioneers and the later youth group?

Bihari: Very little. But of course there were some meetings sometimes. This whole Young Pioneers thing and the Young Communists was mainly an activity of how to find an activity. It had to exist, but nobody knew what to do, because class struggles were over, and what can we do, go for an excursion or collect something, or make a little party. But most of these activities were about how to find an activity, to put it down somehow that we were a loyal group. It was a compulsory thing which nobody took seriously. It was ridiculous, although in the summer we had camps and it was good. There were children who took part in it who liked it.

Thomas: I think I remember 2 people I interviewed, one said that as a Young Pioneer she went out in the woods with her friends and played cowboys and Indians, and the other person said that in high school in the summer time they went out and worked in socially helpful ways, digging ditches or something like that.

Bihari: Yes, we didn't dig ditches but we worked in vineyards or collected apples or helped with the maize. It was 10 days or 2 weeks, a lot of free time, boys and girls of course together and that was good. So it was kind of fun under the pretext of party activity. I even did it when I was a young teacher.

Thomas: So after gymnasium you went to the university?

Bihari: I had to do one year of military service, I was in Hodmezovasarhely----it's very easy to be in Romania because place names are so short, ones in Hungary are so long----this is a Hungarian city----I was there 11 months. Of course we didn't like it because it was the army and it was compulsory. Otherwise it was typical of the Kadar period in the '70's, nobody took it very seriously.

Thomas: What did you do in the army?

Bihari: Oh, hard question. We did the dishes, and sometimes we were guards.

- Thomas: What were you guarding?
- Bihari: Yes. Tanks. Of course the army's also about finding activities for young people to do to avoid absolute boredom. We ate a lot, mainly on weekends when people came from Budapest and we were eating the whole day.
- Thomas: They didn't train you for anything, like give you mechanical training.
- Bihari: Not really, they were stupid even for that. We learned how to take apart and put together a gun. how to shoot of course but very rarely.
- Thomas: Nothing you would use in non-army life.
- Bihari: Not much. Maybe they were a bit afraid of these would-be university students who didn't want to be very serious. There are parts of the army which are taken more seriously. We didn't like it because it was boring and everything unpleasant, but it was also not really serious. What I liked very much was that we were 20 together in a small unit, we were 20. Of course I knew always when I was young, before the army, I knew only people mainly from Budapest, mainly from our own circles. But there were boys together from all parts of the country, from little villages which I had never heard of, it was a quite different experience. I remember one boy's father was a minister, a vicar, I never met anyone before whose father was a vicar. It was quite interesting.
- Thomas: So there was some education to it.
- Bihari: Oh yes. Looking back, I'm not sorry for this because at that time we were terribly sorry for ourselves, spending our time here, at 18 doing nothing, at least nothing useful. But looking back I know very well I needn't be going to school at that time, and there were all sorts of boys, so one learned that a neighbor was studying mathematics and another some other sciences and they were much better at that than I. So it was a very mixed group, and a valuable social experience. After that one year, I went to the university.
- Thomas: Was there any trouble getting into the university? I know earlier there was some difficulty if you did not come from a worker background.
- Bihari: In the '70's it wasn't taken too seriously but you had to reach a rather high academic level. But I was really good at history so I didn't have any difficulty. First I thought of studying English as a second subject, you had to choose 2, but somehow that year there was no English with history, these 2 together somehow did not exist. So I studied history and philosophy.
- Thomas: Where did you learn English? Before you went to the university?

Bihari: First, when I was only 13,14, there was an old lady not far from us in the 13<sup>th</sup> district who was called Eugenie, and she taught me English just privately. One lesson was an hour and 30 minutes, and she was a very good teacher and very demanding. And my parents wanted me to study because, on the one hand, they didn't feel themselves well-educated in languages, almost not at all, and of course being in Hungary they always had the feeling that things are very uncertain, from childhood on languages are very important, you lived sometimes here, sometimes somewhere else, so it's important, they thought that it's a good investment.

So I had English lessons from Eugenie, and then in the gymnasium where we had 2 languages, English and Russian, and I must say we had more English classes a week than Russian, at least 5 English classes and 3 Russian, other classes were French and Russian and Russian and Italian maybe, so at that time there was more and more emphasis on languages. And in the university I tried some other languages also, my German is quite good, and I can use some French.

Thomas: So you knew enough English to use it when you went to the university. What year did you go to the university?

Bihari: Yes. It was in 1976, the army was '75-'76, in September '76 I went to the university, which was 5 years, but it was 6, I spent quite long time, I spent 4 months in East Germany, in the university of Jena, a famous university.

Thomas: What did you study there? German? or history?

Bihari: Actually, it was compulsory for the German groups to go to a German university, of course in East Germany, and it was so unpopular that there were always free places, and I decided that I would like to learn more German, German history and German culture, I knew very little, so I went, that's how I spent a few months there. Well, it was really boring in East Germany, little town, little university, there were a lot of foreigners, Hungarians and from other nations. In that way it was useful, I learned some German, I read a lot, I saw the country, it was cheap of course, I traveled a lot, it was the first time I saw the Wall. Some police told me not to get near the Wall, and I listened to him.

Thomas: Interesting. Was the instruction good there?

Bihari: We had hardly any classes, that was good, so I could read as much as I wanted to in German. Of course I went to some language classes for German students and that was all right, and one of the history classes which was very East German lies, how to say it in Hungarian, so we were ideologically much more liberal than the East Germans.

- Thomas: So you knew ahead of time where they stood and where you stood, so to speak.
- Bihari: It was difficult with the East Germans, I think
- Thomas: Why?
- Bihari: For instance, I think it was in 1980, it was the time when the Russians began flying in space with eastern Europeans. First they took a Czech, then a Pole, then an East German, then a Hungarian into space. And we lived together in small flats, it was rather crowded, and it was at the time when the Russian's space ship went up with a Russian and a Hungarian astronaut. And of course it was rather ridiculous, the whole thing, because at that time the Hungarian astronaut, everything was dependant on the Soviets, and I said a little bit jokingly to the German, "Oh did you listen, what a great thing that the Hungarian is in space", and he took it very seriously and said, "Well, if you didn't know the Russians could do it, we can too". I said "Okay, now I'm very delighted to know it", but some said later that the Germans have not much sense of humor and I think generally that can be true. So I didn't try to make such jokes, they were somehow more formal and more straight. But it had its good side.
- Thomas: Well, you learned a lot about the country and the people and the language. It was a useful few months.
- Bihari: There was even an east German girl who visited me. Later I learned that she married a Danish conductor.
- Thomas: A train conductor?
- Bihari: I think maybe, a train or whatever conductor, which was funny because she was a very bright girl, but for an east German girl to go to Denmark at that time was a great thing. I don't know about her later doings but for her at that time it was something.
- Thomas: Well, you really did notice quite a bit of difference between the university in Budapest and the east German universities.
- Bihari: Well, I know only Jena. I did have some experience and also some experience of those foreigners there, the Bulgarians and others from the great Socialist camp.
- Thomas: And how did you get along with those foreign people? I dare say you did not talk Communism or ideology? Did you have discussions?
- Bihari: That's a difficult question. We didn't really. I cooked for them once or twice, with a friend of mine, and they were quite amazed, mostly the Germans, that

you could make such good things out of potatoes. Not many days, but we made some Hungarian dishes, and they were very satisfied. That was the main content.

Thomas: It sounds as if there weren't any deep philosophical or political discussions.

Bihari: No. I remember a few things from the television because of course we were in the area to receive western television, which was a big problem for east Germans, to watch west German television.

Thomas: And these were things you couldn't watch in Hungary?

Bihari: No. It was the west German state television, it was something much different. For instance, I remember Hitchcock dying at that time and seeing all the old films of Hitchcock, which I don't know if I saw them before or not, but it was nice to see them. Although in Hungary you could see many western films, there were limits of course to what you could see. So sometimes we watched west German state TV with the east Germans and it was different..

Thomas: What was especially different about it?

Bihari: I remember only a few special pictures of course. I think in west Germany there were elections, and never before could I see debates between the party leaders, or between the chancellors, candidates for election. This was for me something new. And that was the time when Tito died, and then there were a lot of German comments about Tito and Yugoslavia and there were projects or prophecies, about what would come, and that was interesting too, discussions in a way we had never had.

Thomas: And I suppose these other students from Romania, Bulgaria, Russia, also had not seen this.

Bihari: I don't remember Romanians, maybe there were but I don't remember. But there were some Russians and some Bulgarians. I don't know how strictly they were held, if they had to report on anything we did, but nobody cared in Hungary or Budapest, nobody cared what we did. We never had to report anything during the 4 months.

Thomas: And none of the professors at the university here had you make a report based on what you had learned.

Bihari: Here? No. So finally it was useful in many ways but mainly learning German which I could use later.

Thomas: So, like the army, it wasn't world-shaking but it was profitable.

Bihari: Yes.

- Thomas: So then you graduated from the university.
- Bihari: Yes, and I had to write my thesis, normally in connection with interpreting the history of Budapest, Hungary, and it was quite a long work and quite big and well-done, but I did not decide to become a professional historian. I don't know why now, maybe because I was lazy. Also they asked me, I was no member of anything, no party member, no youth Communist member anymore, I remember vaguely but I'm not sure that somebody asked me if I wanted to work in, there was an institute of artists and historians, and I asked them what do I have to do, join the party, but I decided I would rather stay out, not because of any big ideological commitment. So then I became a teacher at the high school, which I loved a lot. I still like it
- Thomas: That's what you're doing now.
- Bihari: Yes, not in that school but in another one. It changes sometimes. And I teach history, only history.
- Thomas: What history do you teach, world history or.....?
- Bihari: Everything, from Neanderthal to cosmonaut. If I have time enough, I am often behind the schedule.
- Thomas: That's always a problem, that was a problem for me too. How large are the classes?
- Bihari: Roughly 30, sometimes a bit less, sometimes a bit more. There are some special cases where I have to teach only 10 to 15 or 18 students, but it's a special course for those who want to prepare for a high level exam.
- Thomas: It's an advanced course.
- Bihari: Yes, it's advanced. I married my wife, who is also a teacher. We have 3 children. We used to live in my grandfather's apartment, he died in the '80's, then when my daughter was born, we moved out. The children were born in '91 and '93, the young ones are twins, one boy and one girl, so it was a new Hungary because it was after the changes. For instance, my daughter's birth certificate is stamped with the older coat of arms, the old signs, the younger ones don't have that, but these are historical sources.
- Thomas: So what happened with the changes, what happened in '89?
- Bihari: It was in '89 and '90. I don't think I had any very special experiences. Of course we had long discussion with everybody, with colleagues, with family. I remember quite well that for instance my wife's father, well, I wouldn't say that he was a Communist but he was very much a left-winger, and I tried to persuade him and we were talking about whether these changes were

necessary and was it ridiculous or not sensible to discuss them, well, it was sensible to discuss them and talk about them but not sensible to discuss basic things about democracy. And then with some of my colleagues who were much more radical, I changed position and of course we were talking about how we would have to change the names of such and such streets and schools and everything and all this was very stupid, changing names. Now of course we cannot have a Stalin ut, but I don't mind this. Basically I don't mind such things, they are symbols referring to history, which I know is necessary, they have very strong emotional meanings. But I don't like that too much, I don't like celebrations of symbols. But we had these discussions. Our personal life of course has changed with a family. As you can see now very well, the country has not changed too much. People don't change too much inside, changes are on the outside. So I continued to teach and I took the opportunity to do a PhD at the Central European University which was founded by George Soros.

Thomas: Did you stop teaching to return to the university?

Bihari: There was only one school year that I didn't teach at all. There was one year that I had fewer classes, then the second year I didn't teach at all, and the third year one colleague\*\*\*\*\*classes. Then I wrote my dissertation. This was the years between '99 and finally I had to defend this PhD dissertation in 2005, according to schedule, and at that time I received my PhD.

Thomas: Was this dissertation also on the interwar period?

Bihari: It's mostly on the First World War. It's a sort of a social and cultural history of Hungary during the First World War, 1914 to 1918, which is a very big gap. In essence there are some works about the topic of the war but not about the home front. I was interested in the First World War for various reasons. One reason was that when I was in East Germany I learned a lot about it and I realized that the German experience\*\*\*\*\*although things must have been similar\*\*\*\*\*. The home front must have been quite similar everywhere.  
\*\*\*\*\*  
\*\*\*\*\*. In essence, I think, and maybe I demonstrate it in this work, that the middle classes were most hard hit in the First World War and the internal factions in this class became very strong and all these\*\*\*\*\*.

Thomas: You were saying the tensions between Gentiles and Jews began on the home front during the First World War that later grew.

Bihari: I of course wasn't very correct because they began earlier, and there were better times and there were worse times, they began certainly earlier. I have the feeling that, it's difficult to say of course, without the First World War

there would be very serious tensions in Hungary. I'm not so sure about this in the German case. I think without the First World War, there would have been no Hitler, no Nazis, no really big problems in Germany. I think in Hungary it would have been different, because in Hungary the Jewish presence was much, much stronger than in Germany. I think that was a difficult thing, but the First World War, it was a catalyst, it contributed a lot to these tensions and these stereotypes. That was one reason why I was interested in this period.

Thomas: So you didn't experience great changes at the time that Communism fell?

Bihari: Of course I did, of course I did.

Thomas: And what were they?

Bihari: I can say only common places. Of course one was that shops, stores, \*\*\*\*\*. We didn't have shortages compared to Romania and the Soviet Union, but you could get \*\*\*\*\*.. That was one thing, the other was that you didn't become richer, you relied on the family. The average income, the level of life didn't rise significantly, it did a little bit, we had more cars of course, but mostly because many people including me did extra work all their life.

Thomas: But is that different however from the pre-1989 situation? I understood that in the '80's a lot of people had two jobs, you had to.

Bihari: I didn't have many jobs in the '80's, I had only one job but I had many extra lessons. Now I don't, but I often write articles and reviews, textbooks or.....

Thomas: But wouldn't you do that anyway in the course of your work, isn't that a kind of part of your work on the side?

Bihari: No, it's a good hobby. I read books anyway, if I can write about them and I get paid for it----which is almost non-existent because publishers are also not very rich---- so it's rather a hobby. Of course there are outside very many changes, for instance this area, I knew it before, I was even born here, it has changed tremendously, and also other parts of Budapest, there are so many new buildings and shopping centers, and movies, they are quite different. And my children have absolutely different tastes. My younger daughter is fond of pizza. The first pizzeria in Budapest didn't come til the 1980's, and even then it was questionable if it was really Italian pizza. When my American relatives came here one of the girls was upset that she couldn't get pizza pepperoni, it was the only thing she was interested in. That is typical of some Americans.

Thomas: It is typical of teenagers.

- Bihari: Teenagers also, so we could not produce pizza pepperoni and it was very sad. If she came now it would be easier, I think They have different surroundings, also culture too, much more TV.
- Thomas: Of course computers have multiplied everywhere.
- Bihari: Yes, so it's not very specific to Hungary.
- Thomas: But different TV programs are watched, I daresay, and possibly access to news that you didn't have before, papers and magazines?
- Bihari: Yes, although most Hungarians, average Hungarians, are partly ignorant, partly they don't know much about politics.
- Thomas: So at the time of the changes, you didn't see, or did you, an increase of interest on the part of the Hungarian people in participating in politics, that is, in wanting to have a say, to have different candidates, to vote, to be involved in politics.
- Bihari: In my circles in the end of the '80's, that was a period of very many discussions, things were very lively, also in TV, the papers, everywhere. And of course after that things came back to normality. The trouble is, we're not back to normality now.
- Thomas: What does that mean?
- Bihari: That means that political differences are too strong. I started in a different way. What expectations one had at the end of the '80's I remember quite well. For instance, I don't know what the average Hungarian said, but I knew that the economic situation was not good, and at the end of the '80's, I told many people that if we are at the same level in the mid-'90's as now we will be very lucky. Because at least I knew there would be a set-back financially with the inheritance we had.
- Thomas: What inheritance?
- Bihari: Well, that plants had to be closed, that people had to be fired, that full jobs didn't exist anymore, and so on. And it all came true. It was not the same in the mid-'90's as at the end of the '80's. There was an almost ten-year long set-back. I didn't bring any statistics, but general output reached pre-'90's level only in '98-'99-2000, which meant that this was reflected in the incomes of the households even later and the differences were much much bigger than before. So it was really a shock for very many people. But it was no surprise to me. What was a surprise, and why I said that people didn't change so much, was that at the end of the '80's I expected of course Hungary to become a multi-party democracy, and I didn't know too much about the functioning of that, but I thought that there would be many parties in parliament and there

would be debates and everything would be settled more or less rationally. And of course it didn't come true at all, we have no parties, we have a new political elite, everybody hates everybody, in party politics and in everyday life too, .and things are not settled rationally at all, only symbols and emotions count, and these go back to stupid parts of capitalist history, which I don't like at all

Thomas: Do you think that this has happened because people have not experienced operating in a parliamentary democratic system, they don't know how to do it? Or is there another reason?

Bihari: There are many reasons. I'm not clever enough to know many of them. One was what you said, of course. In order to practice democracy, you know this English saying, that in order to have a green grass [lawn] you have to cut it for 200 years. It's true for Britain, and probably true for America, and even in countries like Britain and America, not everything is perfect.

Thomas: No, it's not perfect at all, in fact it's very difficult.

Bihari: It's difficult, you always have to fight and that is work.

Thomas: Yes.

Bihari: The other thing I said, there is an economic set-back, in Hungary very many people are frustrated. I think it's true that what the Hungarians wanted in general was some sort of Socialism without Communism. What they got is not the best sort of capitalism with the leadership of ex-Communists or ex-Socialists, and very many are upset about this. And then I see a third problem, that our past conflicts are unresolved, even not spoken about. And there are many such conflicts in Hungary among many people and families who are offended, such as the First World War and the Trianon Treaty, and the Second World War and Holocaust, and the Communist period, and if you are offended or if you have some problems or if you have some emotions, then you put just one piece of all this past and say, well, you see, I and my family were persecuted then and then, and another picks another one and says the same to another, because we were Transylvanians, we were Jews, we were non-Communists, we were Communists, and so on. In a normal country, such conflicts, of course they exist, but still they can be more or less rationally spoken of, discussed, and they don't determine the whole public speaking. In Germany they have more or less the same past, but West Germany was a democracy, with the help of the Americans partly, and those German generations who lived in the '60's and '70's, could ask their fathers, what did you do in the '30's, '40's and so on, and now they have a culture of memories. And as a history teacher, I think I more or less know that is possible to exist in Hungary and \*\*\*\*\*things got even worse in this respect. One more thing is that there are no great public persons who can help in resolving this, no universally acknowledged intellectuals, because if you say there is one

intellectual here, then they say oh he is left-wing or he is right-wing, he is not our man, so people don't even speak with the other.

Thomas: I have heard other people say that there have been a lot of "victims", Communists, non-Communists, all the people you mentioned, and nobody can quite forget the past.

Bihari: Yes, and everybody thinks that he is the main victim, and in many ways in Hungary everybody is a victim, and consequently nobody thinks that he is responsible or she is responsible for the present or what he is doing, but he says, well I can't help things, I am in a bad situation because of them, who did this and that to me, my parents, my grandparents, and so on, and somehow it will never be put an end to. It's a bit typical eastern European, I mean I think Poles, Slovaks, Romanians, must have the same or many of them must have the same experiences.

Thomas: Do they have the same feelings about their experiences?

Bihari: I don't know well enough, but until the present elections Europe wasn't upset about the Polish government and their doings, or the Slovak government whose main carp is that if you hate the Hungarians well enough then you are a good Slovak. I say this although I know many Slovaks who are very nice guys and they don't like it at all. And the same things appear in almost every one of these neighbors. It's always easier to be an enemy and say you are a victim than to find ways to work together.

Thomas: So problems don't get solved because each person's got their own problem and they kind of want restitution, they want it made up to them that they lost property or they lost relatives. And so it's hard to get things accomplished. The present leadership, as you say, former Communists or whatever, is that the problem with the present leadership or do they simply want to profit from their positions? Is it ideology or is it greed?

Bihari: I don't think they have much ideology, I think they have the same views of most leaders in Europe. I don't think they have greed but because they are usually successful businessmen and they don't need to get more of this, just people regard them as unscrupulous.

Thomas: You think that's not a fair evaluation of them, to say that they're unscrupulous?

Bihari: Well, it's very much party politics and I must say that I don't like the present government parties but I like the position even less, although I always go every four years to vote because that's the least one can do. I would be rather at a loss if there were elections now, what would be a sensible vote, because I don't see any such people or party or anybody for whom I could vote.

- Thomas: So you don't see leadership which could guide people to think beyond their own particular problems and see a way of improvement.
- Bihari: Yes, and I think most people don't trust.
- Thomas: But you don't see anybody in whom you can trust?
- Bihari: Hardly, yes. So it's something that in most countries takes thirty to fifty or more years of political elitist collapsing, and in Hungary it's only fifteen or eighteen or so years.
- Thomas: Do you think that very many people in Hungary would want to go back to the previous political system?
- Bihari: No, but most people have absolutely no good choices. No, most Hungarians just think that they would like to live as well as the Austrians or the Swiss, or even they think that they have a right to live like that regardless of what they do in this country, they have a right to live as well as the Swiss or the Austrians or the Germans. On the other hand, they want to make Hungarians proud of whatever Hungary is, a country with many national consciousnesses which is hardly a bad thing, and they regard Hungary as a victim of some evil forces, and in one respect as I told you they think that a just society is a society in which most people are more or less equal, a rather socialist or communist thing, so they don't like of course capitalism and capitalists but they like communism or socialism even less. It's a strange mixture of things they don't like.
- Thomas: Well, Hungarians are often said to be very melancholy, very sad. Do you think there is such a thing?
- Bihari: Many say that we are pessimistic.....
- Thomas: Pessimistic, and not dependent upon what has happened in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- Bihari: Well, of course it has some relation to events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but what I told you is also true, and I am one of the pessimistic Hungarians, although I am not always thinking of myself as an arch pessimist, just in the last years I've become more so.
- Thomas: Of course it's hard to define a country and the position of the people in the country as if there's just one. It's much more complex than that. But I've had people say or talk about the Hungarians that they haven't won a war or a battle in 500 years and so they have this gloomy outlook on history and the possibilities for Hungary. I don't know whether that's true or not.
- Bihari: I don't either, but although they don't know what they can be proud of, there are many things. If you want to be a proud Hungarian, there are many things

that you can be proud of. Somehow, I don't know why, we look for battles. If we can find a battle we can be proud, but there are a lot of other things. Maybe they are not so interesting. Just to say one thing, what I sometimes tell my pupils, that presently in Hungary there are absolutely first class writers, novelists, moralists, very good writers. There is a reason Germans read us, much better than German writers, absolutely.

Thomas: Who would you say are some of today's great writers?

Bihari: Well, you probably know Imre Keresz who won the Nobel prize.

Thomas: Yes, I've read him.

Bihari: But many say that while he's a great writer and this novel is an important one, there are at least 2, 3, 4 as good novelists as he who don't get the Nobel prize. We can be proud of them. But nobody cares. Of course it's natural, they are not media stars, clearly. Well, it's true there are a few things we can be proud of. We have Harley. We used to have good sportsmen but we don't have anymore too many. Hungary used to make some good things but it has become a rarity now.

Thomas: Well, at least Istvan Szabo is active.

Bihari: He used to be, but he's rather old now.

Thomas: Well, 2 or 3 years ago "Sonnenschein" was released and that was a very good movie. The other thing is that the 20<sup>th</sup> century record of the Hungarians in music is astonishing, and the scientists, physicists, it's amazing. And that brings up a question I often ask: where did all those musicians come from? I know they went west and made their names and money in the west, but they started here, and what kind of training, where did they train, where did they get this background?

Bihari: All of them are from Leo Weiner, at least one of the teachers, he was a very good musician. It was the musical academy. Solti learned from Leo Weiner, I know, not only but he was the most important musician from whom a lot of those musicians learned.

Thomas: And where did the physicists learn?

Bihari: They learned in the Piaristak, in the evangelical school and in the Fasor school. Do you know Kati Marton, the wife of Richard Holbrook? I accompanied her here for two days, she wanted to write her new book on this Hungarian generation, and I know that she wrote the new book. I wonder if when she comes to Hungary again she will call me because when she needed help she always called me.

- Thomas: She spoke at the 1956 anniversary celebration at the University of California in Berkeley, California and I heard her. And there was an article by her in the recent Hungarian Quarterly which I get.
- Bihari: There were 3 good Hungarian high schools, gymnasium, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Fasor, Piaristak and Minta gymnasium. Fasor was the evangelical, Piaristak was the Catholic, and Minta gymnasium belonged to the university. Most of these Hungarian geniuses came from these high schools.
- Thomas: I think sometimes Hungarians don't realize that all these people came from here.
- Bihari: When they go abroad and they make a success they are very hard to claim. When they are here they don't count. Maybe you have to go abroad to be discovered.
- Thomas: Well, they can probably make a better living abroad too. Do you have any last comments on comparing the two periods of history, the Kadar regime and the current one? Your personal view.
- Bihari: You know this Hungarian Communist philosopher George Lukacs who allegedly said that even the worst Communism is better than the best capitalism, which is of course if he ever said that. I would almost say the reverse, although I don't know the worst capitalism or the best Communism, and even this is too much generalization. But despite all these problems that we have here, I am not crying for the Kadar system or the '70's or '80's, even if I was younger then. I have no personal, nobody hurt me in any way personally. I remember well in the 1980's, and I must say that normal people, and I consider myself a normal person, that we knew in the '80's that it was coming down. We didn't know how it would be, and I'm not clever looking back and seeing things, but I think that many people and certainly I personally thought it would be over soon somehow, it cannot go on like this, just we didn't know how, when, in what way, of course we didn't know Gorbachev. But in the mid-'80's when I started to teach and sometimes we discussed things with the teachers and even with pupils in some ways, [it was obvious] the system was somehow impossible to continue.
- Thomas: So you were not just overwhelmingly surprised when the Berlin wall fell and all of Communism.
- Bihari: That was not the beginning, of course, the Berlin wall, but in the 1980's when Kadar was replaced by successors, and of course there was talk about socialist reforms and democratic socialism and so on, then I made a bet with a friend of mine that there would be multiparty systems within 5 years, and it was within 1 or 2 years, I said 5 years but I didn't know that they would be so fast, but it was obvious that you cannot stop.

- Thomas: And the thing you thought could not continue was the economic system or the political system?
- Bihari: Both, both. And we didn't know the Soviet Union was in so bad a situation but all witnesses, the Afghan war and everything, all knew it had reached its limits, one just had to look at the evidence. But of course we didn't know what was to come after that, we couldn't know it would happen so fast.
- Thomas: Maybe this was not part of your experience, but looking back, would you say that Kadar made things better in Hungary than things were in Bulgaria, Roumania, Czechoslovakia?
- Bihari: Definitely, absolutely. Many say that under Kadar it was boring, with all this boring "goulash" Communism, that it did more harm than Rakosi, but it's hard to believe that, of course, because as I said personally I had no harm, nobody did particular bad, I just knew with my friends that it was an unworkable system that could not go on. Otherwise there is now more literature on Kadar personally, and there is an English book which was published in Hungarian too and its title is "Janos Kadar, the Good Comrade", it's quite a good book, I've just read it in Hungarian, and in some ways it's a nice portrait. In the present system I must say that of course I have more chances, more possibilities in many ways.
- Thomas: What kind of possibilities?
- Bihari: To do more activities than I do, to go more places. If I were younger and more daring then I could make better use of it and I hope my children will, now they are too young for that.. Otherwise I would be happy if my children would choose another country to live in.
- Thomas: Because they'd have more economic opportunity, or political?
- Bihari: No, no, I think it's a society that I told you about, I am fed up with all this, the political culture, what I have tried to summarize, the social life, the victimization of themselves and others. I would be more pleased if they chose Europe.
- Thomas: You don't think that over time things will have changed here, that maybe some leadership will arise, persons better able to change?
- Bihari: I don't think it will come in my lifetime. I could be more optimistic. Well, unless the European Union would be of some assistance. Presently it's not, but it can be, but I don't know.
- Thomas: Has the European Union made any positive changes in Hungary, that is, belonging to the European Union?

- Bihari: Not yet. I hope it will, but in the short run it has only made unpleasant changes.
- Thomas: Such as?
- Bihari: No, it hasn't made anything otherwise, just, it was some lost expectation of the Hungarian public opinion that we go to Europe or we get back to Europe or we get back where we want to, and it happened in 2004 and nothing happened, and many people of course have a feeling of \*\*\*\*\*and I think that the unrest and everything that we experience in Hungary, and partly internationally, is from the fact that there is nothing to expect now. In principle we are in the normal line of European history, everything depends on us mainly, of course on the European Union and our allies whether we can live with each other. So far it is only a negative experience. Not yet a success story.
- Thomas: There hasn't been any change in investment in Hungary from belonging to the European Union?
- Bihari: I don't know. No, because the present government has this very bad policy, taxing and big governmental spending, they could not use the union. In order to reach this, the country should be much more united, to achieve the Irish success story.
- Thomas: Yes, I've heard people mention the Irish and the Portuguese I think as having done better as a result of belonging to the European Union.
- Bihari: And Spain in some respects, yes, definitely.
- Thomas: But that was a matter of internal political adjustment there which hasn't happened here?
- Bihari: Yes, it hasn't yet.
- Thomas: I think that covers it. Thank you, thank you, thank you.
- Bihari: Oh you're welcome.

[End of Interview]