

An Interview with Gabor Drexler

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

Interviews conducted by
Virginia Major Thomas
in 2005

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Biography

Gabor Drexler is the director of the Budapest campus or branch of McDaniel College (formerly called Western Maryland College). He was instrumental in establishing the Budapest campus in 1994.

He was born in 1943, so the majority of his life was lived under the Communist government of Hungary. His father was an engineer. In spite of this middle class background, he was able to go to the university as the result of high entrance examination scores, and he graduated in English and Russian literature and history. After briefly teaching English at a secondary school, he worked in the Institute for Cultural Relations, which involved educational and cultural exchanges with foreign nations as well as travel in the west. Later, after 1981, he worked in the Ministry of Culture, and he also taught 20th century English literature part-time at the university in Budapest. He was a member of the Communist party and he discusses his membership in the interview.

He was recommended to me as a potential interviewee by a mutual friend who teaches at the Central European University. I corresponded with him from the United States but met him only at the time of the interview, which was held in his office at Bethlen Gabor ter 2 in Budapest. He speaks excellent English so I did not need a translator. He had made notes for our interview, as I had written him that there would not be any predetermined list of questions. The result was an account of Hungarian history with few of his personal experiences and feelings. His presentation of his country's history, especially of the Kadar regime, was notable, and his discussion of the current economic and political situation in Hungary was incisive and extremely interesting.

When I sent him the transcript of the interview for editing, he was shocked by how he sounded and completely rewrote the interview after getting my agreement to his doing this. The difference between the unedited and the rewritten transcripts is a matter of better grammar and especially of greatly improved organization of material. This rewriting of the interview was very unusual. I have not changed his rewriting in any way.

- Thomas: This is Major Thomas on November 17, 2005. I am at Bethlen Gabor Square, no. 2 in Budapest, Hungary, and I am interviewing Gabor Drexler. I think we can begin by asking you where and when you were born and a little bit about your family background.
- Drexler: I was born in Szeged, a city close to the southern border of Hungary, during the war. We were lucky to live in Szeged at that time because unlike Budapest, there were no heavy fights apart from occasional air raids.
- Thomas: The date of your birth?
- Drexler: The second of May, 1943.
- Thomas: And your family?
- Drexler: I come from a family of professionals. My father was an engineer, my mother was a schoolteacher.
- Thomas: What kind of an engineer?
- Drexler: He was a mechanical engineer but he worked for most of his life as a construction or designing engineer.
- Thomas: And you went to school in Szeged?
- Drexler: I started school in Szeged but then the family moved to Budapest in 1951, so I have lived most of my life in Budapest.
- Thomas: But you would have started elementary school in Szeged?
- Drexler: That's correct.
- Thomas: And then when you moved to Budapest you continued in gymnasium?
- Drexler: No, first elementary school, then secondary grammar school or gymnasium as it is called in this country. Elementary school took eight years of study, secondary school another four years. At that time, to go to secondary grammar school was not so common, I mean a smaller percentage of the age group decided to continue their education at secondary school. Now it is different. It was one of the best schools in Budapest, the majority of the faculty had earned their degrees and started teaching in the prewar times. They embodied the high academic and moral standards that always characterized these schools.
- Thomas: What was the name?
- Drexler: Rakoczi, named after a Hungarian aristocrat who led a war of independence against the Habsburgs in the early 18th century, Ferenc Rakoczi II. When I

started my first grade in 1957, Latin was still a mandatory subject on the curriculum. One year later, it was made an optional subject and students could choose a modern foreign language instead. This is how I chose English. Russian was the mandatory first foreign language at that time as in all other countries of Central Europe that became part of the Soviet sphere of influence after World War II.

Thomas: Did you have classes in Hungarian or in Russian?

Drexler: No, no, in Hungarian. I must say that is why these oral interviews are useful. If you come from America and even if you are a university professor, you may be uninformed about the intricacies of the history of Central Europe. The question is absolutely inappropriate. The official language of the country was not changed with the Communist takeover in 1948.

Thomas: Tell me what did change in terms of school under the Communists, after '48. The language did not change.....

Drexler: No, certainly not. Why did you assume that? Europe is different from the United States in many ways. Although the United States has its roots in European civilization but it's different in many ways. In Europe, there have always been different nations living side by side and speaking their own languages. When you talk about Hungary, you are talking about a sovereign state that has a history of 1,100 years, and the culture includes the native tongue of the people, so the fact that the country became part of the Soviet sphere of influence did not mean that anybody would have dared to change the official language of the country or the language of instruction at school,

Thomas: But I do think that there were some changes in the curriculum, were there not?

Drexler: There must have been. I was just a small child when the Communist take-over took place in 1949, so I don't have any grounds for comparison. When I started elementary school, Bible class was still part of the curriculum. One year later, it was abolished. Central Europe was liberated from the Nazis by the Soviet Army. The allies agreed on certain principles regarding the restoration of parliamentary democracy and multi-party system. The extremist parties that collaborated with the Nazis were banned, but the Communist Party, which had been declared illegal in the pre-war times, reorganized itself with the support of the Soviet military administration. Free elections were held and there were illusions that Hungary would be able to restore its sovereignty. It seems now, in retrospect, that the future of central Europe had already been decided.

Thomas: It does seem that way.

Drexler: Most historians agree now that Stalin and Roosevelt had reached a tacit understanding at Yalta in 1945 that central Europe would become part of the

Soviet sphere of influence. The West did nothing to prevent the Communist take-over in all these countries. There was only one exception, Yugoslavia, which could retain its independence from the Soviet Union. There were parliamentary elections in 1947, which were won by the Smallholders' Party. The Communists used devious methods, including false charges, deception and coercion, in disrupting the multi-party system. From the perspective of international law, Hungary was an occupied country up to the signing of the peace treaty in 1947. Now, one of the articles of the peace treaty provided for the withdrawal of Soviet troops from the country which never happened.

Thomas: Yes, that's right, not until 1991.

Drexler: Instead the Communist take-over in 1949.

Thomas: What I was asking you about earlier was.....

Drexler: I haven't forgotten your question. The ruling ideology of the Communist system did not tolerate pluralism. You could say that ideology does not affect what you teach in chemistry, physics or biology. It does, however, in a certain way. When the textbooks were rewritten, the most important discoveries and scientific achievements were attributed to Russian and Soviet scientists. When I went to secondary school, we were sometimes joking about it.

Thomas: I'm particularly interested in the teaching of history after the Communist regime came into place.

Drexler: Well, I must stress that my remarks are not based on personal memories. In retrospect, it is quite obvious how the historical facts were manipulated or falsified in the textbooks.

Thomas: But you must know what you were taught.

Drexler: The changes mostly affected 19th and 20th century history. You cannot really interpret the Middle Ages differently, although the general concept was to emphasize the central role of the masses in the course of history and we learnt a lot about the peasant uprisings. With the emergence of the working class in the 19th century and the Communist movement in the early years of the 20th century, all historical events were reinterpreted to prove that the Communists were the most progressive thinkers and the driving force of social progress. The Hungarian Communist Party, which was founded in 1919, was able to seize power for a very short time.....

Thomas: Bela Kun.

Drexler: Yes, with the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy at the end of World War I, there was chaos and anarchy in the country and the Communists were able to seize power for a short time. When the so-called Hungarian Soviet

Republic collapsed, its leaders had to flee from the country and most of them immigrated to Soviet Russia. The leaders of the Communist Party that seized power in 1949 were mostly people who spent the interwar years in the Soviet Union, including Matyas Rakosi, who played a central role in the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic. Needless to say that its importance in 20th century Hungarian history was highlighted in the textbooks.

- Thomas: How did the teachers trained before World War II cope with the new ideology?
- Drexler: That's a hard question. You had to adapt to the new circumstances, otherwise you risked being fired. And we sensed, even as high school kids we sensed that they didn't dare to say that this is what we find in the textbook, this is what I am supposed to tell you, but I have my own views or experience about the matter. That never happened but you sensed from time to time this contradiction. I give you an example. Every week, there was an extra class for head teachers at which they had to talk about ideological topics. At one of these classes, the topic was whether God exists or not. One of the ruling tenets of Marxism-Leninism was, of course, that God does not exist. Now, the head teacher told us what he was expected to say about this topic, but then he added that he believes in God. As a good Christian, he confessed his faith.
- Thomas: And he was rather brave.
- Drexler: Yes. But certainly, even as a high school kid we noticed that something unusual was going on. High school kids do not have life experience, they have no grounds for comparison, they have no grounds for saying that I don't accept this because according to my views or my experience it is not so. You have a certain knowledge gained within the family, you may hear a lot that contradicts what you learnt at school, but most parents did not want any conflict and showed restraint.
- Thomas: What was your family background? Were your parents Roman Catholic? Protestant? Nothing?
- Drexler: Roman Catholic. But then whatever you learn at school, you accept it as a fact. Especially if it's printed. You have this instinctive trust that whatever is printed must contain the truth. It's a good question, because there was this dual value system in society. On the one hand, you had the official ideology but the majority of people did not accept many of the basic tenets of this ideology and you may have heard just the opposite at home.
- Thomas: And of course high school kids would pick up that there were 2 points of view, they would be sensitive and realize.....
- Drexler: Yes. That explains that when the democratic institutions were restored in 1989 and we had the first free elections after so many decades under an

authoritarian regime, it was surprising to see how certain traditional values lived on.

Thomas: At the fall of Communism?

Drexler: Yes, that conservative values survived and still existed as if nothing had happened between the pre-war times and 1990. That underlines the crucial role of the family in passing on certain values to the children. And if those values do not agree with the official ideology, obviously you live a double life as you are aware that whatever you may think, it is not advisable to talk about it openly or express your opinion because you may get into trouble.

Thomas: Was there then a great sense of relief at the changes that at last people could express what they really thought, did that happen?

Drexler: It did happen----you are talking about '89?----it did happen, but first of all, I would like to sum up what the Communist system meant for society, it's very important.....

Thomas: Please. And for you.

Drexler: Not particularly for me. It's already a closed chapter of history. But those who have never lived under a Communist regime cannot really imagine what it was like. We already spoke about the Communist takeover in the countries of Central Europe in the late '40's. All means of production were nationalized, practically everybody became an employee of the state, all private property was confiscated without compensation, farmers were forced into agricultural cooperatives, everybody became equal in a sense that nobody could retain any private property and the social differences that were based on wealth disappeared. All this transformation had a dramatic and negative impact on the way of life of society.

Thomas: How? Specifically. An example of transformation that you saw or.....

Drexler: I remember that we lived in poverty, there was food rationing, a severe shortage of consumer goods and you had to stand in line for everything. I'm talking about the '50's, the years leading to '56, and although my father was a construction engineer working for a state planning office, the salaries were so low that we lived in poverty. That's about the '50's. I was not aware at that time that after the war, poverty and shortages were quite common even in the western part of Europe. In England, for example, food rationing was maintained until the middle of the 50's because the country was so exhausted as a result of the war effort.

Thomas: And because of the destruction. I came to Europe in '49-'50 and that was the time when you could spot an American instantly because they had such nice clothes.

- Drexler: Well, then you have grounds for comparison. When I had an opportunity to visit the German Democratic Republic in the '70's, it was strange to see the remnants of the war in the center of Berlin and Dresden. Apparently, the Soviet Union did not have the resources to help East Germany fully recover from the destruction of the war.
- Thomas: I had an interviewee tell me that she went to London I think it was in the '70's and I asked her her impressions of London and she said it was like a city that had never experienced war, by that time they had built back, but they had not built back yet here in Budapest, it was at that time, when the royal palace had not been rebuilt, so what she noticed was the lack of destruction in London which had had the blitz. Budapest did not have, the Communists did not have the finances to build back so quickly.
- Drexler: When you speak about the Communist regime in this country, you cannot overestimate the importance of the uprising in 1956, that was indeed a watershed in the story of the Communist regime, although it was crushed by the Soviets by force, but it had a lasting legacy.....
- Thomas: Which was?
- Drexler: You know, the Communist regime was restored but the old leadership was replaced by a new leadership and they learned certain lessons, certain repressive practices couldn't be continued.....
- Thomas: Or were modified.
- Drexler: Modified. It is true that the essential nature of the system did not change, it remained a one-party system, one ruling ideology and so on, but it became much more tolerant and liberal.
- Thomas: Were you old enough to have noticed the change?
- Drexler: Well, I graduated from secondary school in 1961, at the age of 18, so I was old enough to understand. Although the regime remained a one-party system but the general atmosphere changed considerably.
- Thomas: So Kadar modified things, he wasn't like Rakosi.
- Drexler: Rakosi, together with other members of the old leadership and their families, fled from the country with the help of the Soviets in the first days of the uprising. They had every right to fear that their lives would be in danger. They had a very negative record. (laughs)
- Thomas: Well, Kadar had a little bit of a negative record.

- Drexler: No, not really. If we are talking about the reprisals that followed the crushing of the uprising, yes. On the other hand, many believe that the country was lucky to have Kadar as the new party leader. In 1962 Kadar said, it's a quotation from the New Testament, that "those who are not against us are with us," which was totally the opposite of what the philosophy of the old leadership had been, that whoever is not with us is against us. What resulted from this attitude was that they were always searching for enemies within the party and in society.
- Thomas: Yes, and that was not practiced, at least eventually, under Kadar.
- Drexler: When we try to assess Kadar who was a Communist and probably believed in those tenets, it may be true that his judgment is controversial. Those who suffered persecution after 1956 because of their participation in the events of the 1956 uprising, Regrettable Events as they were called later on (laughs), Regrettable October Events, will never forgive, or their families will never forgive. After all, more than 200 persons were executed. But the decisive majority of the people who had lived under the Rakosi regime clearly understood that his political philosophy and his intents were different, he wanted to make life better for the citizens of the country, and this was appreciated. While there are many who say that Kadar was an executioner, those generations that grew up and lived under the Kadar regime appreciate the relative freedom that the people enjoyed. The basic tenets were not to be questioned openly (one-party system, the leading role of the party in society, the country's allegiance to the Soviet Union) but people were not harassed and living standards rose. It's like with Miklos Horthy, who was the head of state in the inter-war years. Even today, historians cannot agree on his assessment. As regards Kadar, the era that is hallmarked by his name is too recent, we lack the historical perspective as they say. I am sure that the judgment of posterity will be more generous to him. When he died in 1989, tens of thousands of people attended the funeral, and not because they were all Communists, that's a total misunderstanding. It was simply because the people appreciated his role in making a better life for the citizens under the constraints of the Communist system. When Imre Nagy, the Prime Minister of the 1956 uprising, was solemnly reburied on the anniversary of his execution on June 16, 1989, it was widely regarded as a symbolic burial of the Kadar regime. When Kadar died a couple of weeks later, huge crowds gathered along the route of the funeral procession to the cemetery and more than a hundred thousand attended his funeral. The people were aware that an era had ended with his death. It was not intended as a demonstration in support of the Communist ideals or the regime. They paid tribute to the man.
- Thomas: I'm glad to hear this, I have a negative picture of Kadar. But I also know that Kadar, as we say, "tacked to the wind", that is to say, he adjusted to circumstances and seems to have tried his best to make things better under the existing circumstances.

Drexler: Okay, what we must understand is that Kadar's role or name is used as an argument in today's political debates. Some people want to create a false impression that the 1956 uprising could have succeeded if Kadar had not become a traitor. That is a ridiculous assumption. Everyone knows that the Soviet decisions were dictated by the logic of the Cold War and the United States made it clear to Khrushchev, the Soviet party leader, that it did not regard Hungary and the other Central European satellite states as "potential allies", in other words, it had no intent to intervene. It may not be clear for an American audience, but it is absolutely certain that the Soviets actually abducted Kadar, who was a member of the Imre Nagy government, and flew him to Moscow to try to convince him that a "counter-revolution" was unfolding in Hungary with the aim of restoring the Capitalist system and that this process had to be stopped at any cost. Kadar was invited to visit the Soviet ambassador, Yuri Andropov, later secretary general of the Soviet Communist party, at the Soviet Embassy on the last day of October. He was then taken to Moscow and nobody heard about him until the 4th of November when the proclamation of the so-called Workers' and Peasants' Revolutionary Government was broadcast from Szolnok. His wife was wandering in the corridors of the Parliament Building for days, looking for her husband and asking everyone if they had seen "Janos". When President Yeltsin paid an official visit to Hungary in the early '90's, he brought with him copies of top secret documents that shed light on the background of the events of 1956 and the decisions of the Soviet party leadership. This was a gesture of reconciliation on his part and he expressed his sorrow for the Soviet intervention at a plenary session of the Hungarian Parliament. From the "Yeltsin Papers", it is quite clear that Kadar first resisted the pressure, but when the Soviets explained to him that the decision to intervene militarily had already been taken and that the old Communist leadership would be sent back to Hungary were he not willing to assume the role of Prime Minister, he finally gave up resistance. The West remained silent, although it was evident that the Soviets were preparing to crush the uprising by force.

Thomas: That's right, yes, I remember that.

Drexler: But again, historically, we can say there were specific circumstances. For instance, in the U.S. you had presidential elections, which coincided with the Soviet invasion. Britain and France were bogged down with the Suez crisis that diverted attention and may have prompted the Soviet Union to feel that it was authorized to act freely in its own sphere of influence. The superpowers strongly believed that one of the tokens of peace in Europe was respect for the division of Europe, so I don't really know what to say, obviously nobody knows the answer. What the Hungarians, if they have any reproaches and they do have, say is that maybe more political pressure should have been exerted on the Soviet leadership and Hungary should have been given more moral support in the United Nations organization or, I don't know.

Thomas: It's hard to say what would have happened.

GS: What could have been done in order to avert this danger, that the Soviets put an end to the uprising by force.

Thomas: I've got to ask you one question about your going to the university. I have understood from some of the people I've interviewed that they were not able to go to the university because of their middle class or maybe upper class background. And I wondered how, your father was an engineer, he was not a worker or peasant.....

Drexler: First of all, my family was not involved in politics. My parents did not come from the former upper classes whose children were discriminated. My brother and I did not go to a church school. Some of the church schools run by the Catholic church or by Protestants survived. To be a graduate of a church school was a disadvantage when you applied for admission to the university. It doesn't mean that everybody was refused, because these schools indeed represented a very high academic quality, but it was a disadvantage. Then there were certain objective constraints. For each institution, the state determined the number of new students that could be admitted. This concept was part of the centrally guided economy and social planning. When those students were due to graduate, it was the responsibility of the state to provide jobs for them.

END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE

Drexler: So, in fact, it all rested on the concept of long-term planning of human resources, like how many mechanical engineers we are going to need in 10 years' time or in 20 years' time and how many teachers we are going to need or whatever, and this is how they determined the number of students that could be admitted. We shouldn't forget that we are talking about state institutions that were and are financed from public funds.

Thomas: But there was preference given to those whose background was worker or peasant, but others were not completely denied. Is that what you're saying?

Drexler: Yes, right, and now.....

Thomas: How did you get in?

Drexler: An entrance examination had to be taken by all applicants. It was abolished recently.

Thomas: That has been abolished?

Drexler: That has been abolished. When students are in their senior year at secondary school, they are required to take a final examination in certain mandatory and optional subjects. The passing of the final examination qualifies a student to apply for admission into an institution of higher learning. Mandatory subjects

are Hungarian literature and grammar, history and mathematics. The rest depends on the requirements of the institution a student seeks admission into. If it is a medical school, then you take the final exam in biology and chemistry. Now the system of final examinations has been reformed. Those who wish to apply for admission to an institution of higher learning are required to take advanced level exams in the subjects that are required for entry, and the entrance examination has been abolished. Applicants are admitted on the basis of the scores they earned for the advanced level exams. The limitations as to the maximum number that can be admitted have not changed. The institutions cannot open the doors to every applicant. That is impossible because the institutions would collapse, or it would lead to a total chaos.

Thomas: But don't the grades that they make.....

Drexler: The grades do matter, that is my point. I graduated from secondary school with distinction, and it did matter. Also the scores that I attained on the entrance examination for the School of Liberal Arts of Lorand Eotvos University in Budapest. In this country, you must decide what major field of study you wish to pursue and you apply for admission into that major. In my case, it was English and Russian literature and history. At that time, students had to choose two single majors at the Liberal Arts schools.

Thomas: Where did you learn English? In secondary school?

Drexler: At secondary school, yes. Now going back to Communist times, we lived in a totally isolated world, even in the '60's.

Thomas: Does that mean you did not get press and couldn't go to the west?

Drexler: We couldn't travel, Western radio broadcasts were jammed, the BBC, World Service, the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, were all jammed. Jamming was abolished in the early '70's if I recall correctly, with the exception of Radio Free Europe, the Hungarian broadcast of Radio Free Europe. As young people, we listened to Radio Luxembourg, which could be received and it had an English language pop music program. This is how young people in Hungary got acquainted with the leading British and American pop singers and groups, because pop music records were not imported into the country. At the few hotels in Budapest that catered for visitors from the west, you could buy Newsweek or Time magazines or daily papers, like the International Herald Tribune, but they were not available at newsstands. That was part of the ruling ideology, that whatever comes from the west is decadent and they want to undermine Communism, so this "policy of infiltration" has to be curbed. That's what it was called in the late '60's and '70's, the policy of infiltration.

Thomas: If you listened to western music on Radio Luxembourg, did you then feel that you were being disloyal or a traitor?

Drexler: No, certainly not. Young people are the same everywhere, which means that politics was above me, I was not involved in politics even as a university student. I was a member of the Communist youth organization like the majority of my age group, but I did not participate in the activities or discussions.

Thomas: Did you have any reaction in '68 when the Prague Spring took place? When an anti-Communist movement took place and the Russians with Hungarian troops moved into Prague?

Drexler: Well, it was not an anti-Communist movement. First of all, everybody had the experience of 1956. The uprising broke out against a repressive leadership and the presence of the Soviet troops. It was not necessarily against certain Socialist ideals, like the public ownership of the most important means of production. At that time, that was the position of Social Democratic parties in western Europe, too. Now what Dubcsek and his comrades wanted in the Prague Spring was to reform the Communist, let's not talk about the Communist system because this has a negative connotation, they wanted to reform the Socialist system to make it more democratic, they spoke about the need for a "human-faced" Socialism. Obviously the Soviet leadership had fears that this is a movement that you cannot really keep under control and they didn't want another 1956 in Prague. Now Kadar played an important role in trying to mediate between the Soviets and the Czechs. We read in the papers about the Soviet leaders visiting Prague and the Czech leaders visiting Moscow, so everybody knew something was going on in Prague, but the invasion came as a shock, and we, maybe this is a different perspective, you know, we thanked God that there was no armed resistance in Prague, because we knew, I mean those who.....

Thomas: You'd been there.

Drexler: Yes, you know, we knew what Budapest looked like after the crushing of the uprising in 1956.

Thomas: Well, I had an interviewee tell me that when he was in the university in '68, that's when he first became politically conscious because he was embarrassed that Hungary was helping the Soviet Union stop the reform, or however you want to put it.

Drexler: Okay, again you know, I mean this may be a different approach. This time the Soviet Union did not want to act unilaterally, so they decided to involve their allies. But they would have intervened under any circumstances. The only Warsaw Pact country that did not participate in the invasion of Czechoslovakia was Romania. Now Romania was the most repressive, the

most orthodox Communist regime. On the other hand, Ceaucescu was a very cunning politician, he made a point of demonstrating Romania's independence from the Communist bloc or from the common policy decided by Moscow. This is how he became a favorite of the west. When he met his disgraceful end in 1989, a lot of leading politicians in the west must have felt ashamed that they had anything to do with this man. As to Hungary's involvement, Kadar did his best in trying to avert the danger of the invasion, but when he couldn't, he didn't say no. There is a very simple explanation that may not be clear to somebody who is not familiar with the history of the region. The Hungarian party decided to introduce certain elements of market economy in the middle of the '60's. It meant granting more independence to the state companies, encouraging competition, encouraging trade and competition with western companies. This concept was contrary to the orthodox tenets of Marxism, Leninism, and the Soviet model of Communist economy in many ways. They fixed a date for launching the "new economic mechanism" – 1968. And unfortunately, the two events coincided. Many observers say that Kadar, who was very strongly against any intervention, decided to go along with it when his efforts to avert it had failed, because he did not want to jeopardize the success of the domestic economic reforms to which the party leadership attached high hopes. And indeed they brought very good results. But, unfortunately, the international climate totally changed after the invasion, and it had a negative impact on the relations of Hungary with the western world, although it did not last long.

Thomas: Kadar was not crazy.

Drexler: No, certainly not. I'm just trying to offer an explanation. He was always a very cautious person, and he was aware that there is a price to be paid for the relative independence that Hungary enjoyed in her internal affairs.

Thomas: And those are the economic reforms.

Drexler: Yes. The position of Hungary was unique in the Communist bloc after 1956. Kadar enjoyed more freedom in experimenting in domestic affairs as long as Hungary did not want to take an independent path and did not question the basic tenets of Marxism-Leninism. But the other Socialist countries, especially the GDR, often criticized the Hungarian party for deviating from the Soviet model. Kadar cautiously followed the common policy, but he used his prestige to mediate between the two blocs. Kadar was the first leader of the Communist bloc to establish closer relations with the Social Democratic parties of Western Europe. The Social Democrats were regarded as the "Anti-Christ" by Moscow and the Communist movement, because they accepted the reality of Western parliamentary democracy and wanted to come into power in free elections. As you know, the Communists chose a different path. Some of these Social Democratic parties were in power, for instance, in Western Germany. Moscow tolerated the closer ties of the Hungarian party with the Social Democrats but was probably not too happy about it.

Interruption

Drexler: I tell you an interesting story regarding the invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. At that time, I was a regional officer at the Institute of Cultural Relations. They had recently installed a telex machine which was put in a room on my floor. We learned about the invasion and the participation of Hungarian troops in it from the morning news of the Hungarian Radio. Then, no information followed. In the 12 o'clock news, there was nothing about the invasion and everyone who had a friend or relative in Prague was extremely worried. There was a complete security black-out, it was impossible to get in touch with Prague by telephone. I had a colleague whose husband had traveled to Prague on a business trip a couple of days earlier, and she was very worried. Since I mastered the use of telex at my previous workplace, the International Department of the Hungarian Automobile Club, I offered her to try to get in touch with the Hungarian trade representative in Prague by telex and I succeeded. They wrote back that there were Soviet tanks everywhere in the city but there was no fighting and the streets were calm. It was good news.

Just imagine that I broke the security black-out. Then, in a week, they installed a safety door on the telex room with a steel grid. When I witnessed this, I immediately understood that I had made a serious mistake. The authorities must have warned my workplace about the breach of the security black-out. I felt bad for a couple of days, but nobody said anything to me.

Thomas: I've got to ask you two things: something about yourself, what you did when you got out of the university, and then the changes and what differences they made.

Drexler: Okay, when I graduated I was teaching for a year.....

Thomas: Teaching what?

Drexler: English, at a secondary school. I didn't get the tenure, which meant that it was a temporary job, and then I spent one year at the International Department of the Hungarian Automobile Club. Then I applied for a position at a government agency which was responsible for cultural and educational exchanges with foreign countries, with responsibilities like those of the Fulbright Commission in America or the British Council in England. I had a recommendation from the Chair of the English Department who liked me and probably thought that I had the qualities for this kind of a job.

Thomas: Saw you as promising!

Drexler: Yes. Indeed, looking back, despite the very meager circumstances at the university, we had a wonderful faculty in the English department. The chair of the department was at that time the foremost Shakespeare scholar in the country. The circumstances were meager because, just imagine, these

departments were not allowed to maintain relations with their counterparts in England. It's quite interesting, though, that all the classical works were available, you could find Penguin editions.....

Thomas: Of the great works of English literature.

Drexler: The great works of English literature were available, but not contemporary works, journals or daily papers. The English majors were warned not to visit the British Council Library at the British embassy. It was quite annoying, because we had a very modest library at the university. So what we did was to visit the open-shelf library but we didn't dare to register. Since the librarian was a Hungarian, we feared that she would report us to the authorities. So we visited the library but could not borrow books.

Thomas: Did this mean that you had to use the books there and not take them out?

Drexler: Right. The required readings were available at the university, but it was fun to read *The Times* or *The Economist* or *The London Illustrated Magazine*. It is an example of how these ideological restraints functioned in everyday life.

Thomas: So what happened to you then?

Drexler: I spent 10 years at the Institute for Cultural Relations, first as a regional officer, later on as Head of Section and Head of Department. I had an opportunity to travel on official business to a number of Western countries, including the U.S., which was a privilege at that time, and indeed looking back on those years, I can say that it was a very rewarding experience. The policy of the Hungarian government was to expand cultural and educational exchanges with foreign countries on the basis of mutual interests and we had the funds for new programs, cultural events, etc.

Thomas: When is that in time? Is that in the '70's?

Drexler: In the '70's. In '81, the Institute was abolished as a separate agency and it was merged into the ministry of Culture and Education. I continued to work in the ministry but I retired in 1991 when I had my first open heart surgery. I had a second one since then in 2000.

Thomas: And here you are. When did you come here? To McDaniel?

Drexler: I played an instrumental role in the establishment of the Budapest Campus in 1994 and served as Director and Dean of the Faculty in the first six years. I was invited to participate in the project as the managing director of College International, the Hungarian business organization that provides the framework and services for our program, was once my colleague and he was aware that I had the necessary qualifications. I taught at the university for several years parallel to my job in state administration.

Thomas: You taught English literature?

Drexler: Yes, twentieth century English literature, and I had the necessary skills in administration and management, I had vast experience in international cultural and educational exchanges, not to mention the language proficiency requirements. The idea of the managing director of College International was to launch an American undergraduate degree program in Hungary in Business Administration and Economics. The first two years at the Budapest Campus, the upper two years at the home campus of the institution in the United States. There was in the early nineties, the period of transition into free market economy in the new democracies of Central Europe, McDaniel College (at that time known as Western Maryland College) was found through an acquaintance, a Hungarian-born member of the U.S. House of Representatives. It is a prestigious private college in Maryland, located in the vicinity of Washington D.C. and Baltimore. The President of the college was open to the idea of establishing a joint venture and immediately said "yes". That is how the Budapest Campus of McDaniel College was founded. In 1995, we had a visitation from the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, the accrediting agency for McDaniel. The representatives of Middle States were very pleased with what they found at the Budapest Campus, and the accreditation of McDaniel was extended to cover the Budapest location. We just celebrated the 10th anniversary of the foundation of the Budapest program.

Thomas: So this was one of the results of the change, is that right?

Drexler: Yes, well I think, if there had not been a change then it may have been unthinkable.....

Thomas: Or maybe slower in coming about.

Drexler: Talking of the change, the economic problems began in the early '80's and they coincided with the aging of Janos Kadar, the party leader. Succession is never an easy issue in a Communist regime, as it lacks the constitutional mechanisms. It usually involves a power struggle behind the scenes that temporarily destabilizes the country. Then came Gorbachev with his reforms in the Soviet Union in 1985. Well, everybody who followed with attention what was going on in the Soviet Union was a bit confused because he did not really have any program for reforming such vital spheres of society as the economy. His policy of "glasnost" (transparency) did not change the totalitarian nature of the regime and it didn't lead to real pluralism in society. There were clear signs of a disintegration of the Soviet system, and nobody knew what would follow. Maybe in Washington D.C. everybody was happy, but indeed we are lucky that the demise of the Soviet Union was peaceful because it could have been different. But anyway, there was a growing feeling of unease in Hungary and if you had asked anybody, an informed person, in '87 if it was possible for Hungary to restore a multiparty system, he would

have thought you were crazy, out of your mind. But Gorbachev's so-called reforms and the weakening of the Soviet Union started a process of fermentation in the traditionally rebellious countries as Poland and Hungary. These were the countries in which the possibility of restoring western-type parliamentary democracy and multi-party system was first brought up by leading intellectuals. So the climate changed, and intellectuals began to organize movements, debates, etc. The events ran parallel in Poland and Hungary, but Poland was ahead of us because they had the Solidarity movement in the early '80's and that led to the

Thomas: They had the Round Table.....

Drexler: Yes they had the Round Table, and we had the same in 1989. So it was a negotiated transition into parliamentary democracy. But you wouldn't find people who would regret the restoration of democratic institutions.

Thomas: Do you think everyone is happy with it?

Drexler: I don't say people are happy. In fact, what I am suggesting is that there is widespread disillusion. But the disillusionment has nothing to do with western-type Parliamentary democracy or multi-party system, it has to do with the way privatization of state property was carried out, which led to the loss of.....

Thomas: How did it happen?

Drexler: Well, the whole thing should have been given much more careful thought and it should have been implemented step by step in a gradual way. Instead the first freely elected government and its successor decided to speed up the privatization process and there was a lot of corruption involved. One-third of the once state-owned property cannot be accounted for and more than 1.5 million jobs were lost in the process. But when you look at the privatization process in the other new democracies, you find more or less the same. We should be happy and thank God that despite whatever shortcomings the economic transformation had, it has not led to the kind of society that developed in Russia.

Thomas: Do you think that many people would like to go back to the previous system?

Drexler: No, I don't think so. What we must understand is that this was a negotiated transition, supported by the people. It may be true that the people had unfounded hopes about the democratic system. There are many disillusioned people and one-third of the population lives in poverty. Those who criticize the current form of government say that we would have needed a revolution, instead of a compromise between the old Communist elite and certain elite groups of the opposition. At the round table negotiations, the Socialist party, which was in power, they accepted the necessity of changes and the necessity

of the restoration of democratic institutions. They proposed the bills to Parliament that enabled the country to have the first free elections, they proposed the bill on the restoration of the multi-party system, they proposed the bill on the new electoral law, the post-Communist one.....

- Thomas: This was a reform party of socialists? They were interested in preserving socialism.....
- Drexler: No, they were under the impression, and all opinion polls up to the middle or maybe up to the fall of 1989 showed that they would win the elections so they would have nothing to lose.
- Thomas: But they didn't.
- Drexler: They didn't. But they came back to power, twice, first in 1994 and again in 2002.
- Thomas: I keep hearing that the leaders of the government are the old Socialists in new clothes, so to speak, not that their minds have changed but that the same people are still in power. Is that a valid statement?
- Drexler: Yes, it's partly valid, it's no longer valid in the sense that the new Prime Minister is a young man, he's 43 years old. He accumulated his assets in the privatization process so he is a billionaire, don't ask how.
- Thomas: I was going to.
- Drexler: Nobody knows but one can have guesses. That is one of the problems. The new propertied class consists of many member of the old Communist nomenclature. It shows that those were successful in the privatization process that had good connections. Now, back to your original question, I think that there are very few people who are indeed committed Communists or have any nostalgia for the old system. If there is any nostalgia it's for the lost feeling of security and stability that characterized the best years of the Kadar regime, when there was full employment, when there was no poverty. It didn't mean that everybody had the same living standards but we did not have this outrageous poverty that you can see today. There are more than a hundred thousand homeless people. That never existed before.
- Thomas: Neither did unemployment, as I understand it, it did not exist under the socialist system.
- Drexler: But at the same time, it was one of the shortcomings, the built-in problems of the Socialist concept of the economy, especially in the case of a country that had an export-oriented open economy. You cannot isolate yourself from the influences and effects of free market economy. That was always the

contradiction with the reformed economic policy, that the Socialist economy is ultimately incompatible with the laws of the market economy.

Thomas: What I'm wondering is, do a lot of people feel that the freedom of speech and press that now exist isn't worth the insecurity, the unemployment

.....

Drexler: No, I don't think that the people blame the system. They blame the political leaders. True, the people are losing trust in the political institutions. What they see is futile debates in Parliament, mud-slinging, what they see is incompetence. I myself was part of the elite in the '80's because I had a responsible position in state administration, and I never thought that it was because I was a member of the party. I wasn't even a member of the party when I entered this government agency, the Institute for Cultural Relations.

Thomas: Did you have to become a member of the party?

Drexler: No, it was not a prerequisite for getting the job, but, on the other hand, the secretary of the local party organization called on me and said that it was a shame that I was not a member of the party, so in one year I yielded to the pressure, but I never enjoyed any privileges as a party member. There were more than 800,000 members of the party. Membership in the party at my level was regarded as a token of loyalty to the party or to the regime because party and regime were identical.

Thomas: Did you ever think, were you surprised at the changes, the coming into being again of a parliamentary system? You said earlier you were not surprised.

Drexler: No, I wasn't. First of all, I never believed in the superiority of the Socialist model. Although nobody ever spoke about it, everybody was aware that this was a system that had not been chosen by the Hungarian people. That the system was imposed on Hungary by the Soviet Union. In a society where the freedom of expression, the freedom of press, are guaranteed, you don't need to be brave to express your views. In a totalitarian regime, even if it is of the more liberal type, everything is different. There were certain taboos, one was not to question the one-party system, the leading role of the party, the alliance with the Soviet Union.

END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO

Thomas: Then you would expect that sooner or later the Socialist system would fail or collapse?

Drexler: No. Like most people, I was convinced that the system would last forever. The Soviet Union did not tolerate any major deviation from the Soviet model of the political system. To give you an example, the Hungarian party initiated a

new electoral law in 1985 that made it –possible to have more than one candidate for parliamentary elections in each constituency. In addition to the official candidates proposed by the Hungarian People’s Front, independent candidates were also allowed to run for elections. It so happened that in one of the constituencies, the official candidate was defeated by an independent candidate at the next elections. The official candidate happened to be the First Secretary of the Party Committee of the given county. Believe it or not, Gorbachev sent a message to the Hungarian leadership that the new electoral law might undermine the leading role of the Party. Gorbachev, who was otherwise a reform-minded politician, did not understand that this was just a small tiny step in the direction of pluralism that wouldn’t threaten the “leading role” of the party, at least not in the short run.

Thomas: I understand that, but what I mean is, did that not prepare you for the changes, the fact that you never really believed.....

Drexler: The Soviet Union was weakening but nobody knew how weak the Soviet Union was and what the reactions of the Soviet Union would be to any change. It has been revealed now that the western Social Democratic leaders sent messages to Kadar that Hungary should slow down the processes because they feared that there would be a repercussion on the part of the Soviet Union. This is just to illustrate that whatever happened at the end of the ‘80’s was so unexpected, on the other hand, it came so naturally. I recall that I had a conversation with a Spanish diplomat when the central Committee of the party was discussing the concept of the bill on the freedom of association in 1989, aimed at granting the right to the citizens to create independent movements, organizations and societies. Nobody spoke about a multi-party system, but it was evident that this new freedom might lead to a multi-party system in the end. The Spanish diplomat asked me “Where is all this going to lead? What is going to happen if people begin demanding free elections? What will be the reaction of the Communists?” My response was that they accepted the idea of pluralism and everyone knows what the consequences are. I was convinced that once the Socialist party accepted the new rules of the game, sooner or later it would lead to a multi-party system. They probably consented to the idea of pluralism because at that time, their popularity index was very high and they acted under the impression that they would have the majority of seats in the new Parliament anyway. If you look back it is quite clear that the opposition forces participating in the National Round Table conference were of the same opinion, otherwise they would not have insisted that a large number of topics should be decided in Parliament by a two-thirds majority. When in 1990, one of the new political formations, the Hungarian Democratic Forum and its allies, the Christian Democrats and the Freeholders party, won the elections, they proposed an amendment to the Constitution to limit the number of topics that would require a qualified majority. Indeed, the election results showed that although there was no revolution, the majority of the people wanted change and voted for change. One of the traps here was that the new political formations did not have detailed programs for the transition to

market economy. The restoration of parliamentary democracy went smoothly, what you needed was to have free elections. But as regarded the economic transformation, how to dismantle state ownership, there were no programs. It wasn't clarified what the government's tasks should be under the conditions of free market economy with a large private sector. But I cannot blame them. This was a unique historical situation, with no analogies.

Thomas: I have heard people say that nobody really expected that it would be so difficult, that to change the system to a multi-party system, change to privatization, that nobody expected it would be so hard to do.

Drexler: I don't really understand the question. Negotiated transition was only in Poland and in Hungary. In all other countries of Central Europe, the Communist system collapsed, though without bloodshed but it collapsed. Now.....

Thomas: But I think what they're talking about is now, they're disillusioned, because they thought it would be better and easier.

Drexler: That life, the conditions of life would be better. But we are not talking about political democracy, what we are talking about is the enormous social differences that have emerged or developed, that you have a very rich new propertied class that accumulated its wealth in the past 15 years. There can be no other explanation because such wealth could not have been accumulated under the conditions of the old regime. On the other hand, you have the deprived strata of society, the feeling of anxiety and insecurity, the fear of losing your job or losing your hope of finding a new job. In the old regime, social status depended on education, position, and not on wealth. Seemingly the structure of society was similar to that of Western societies with a large middle class. But that middle class did not have property and now many of them are losing their middle class status.

INTERRUPTION

Thomas: But I hear a lot of criticism of the politicians, of the leadership, as if, they don't compare to Kadar, they don't talk about Kadar, but they bitterly criticize the present parties and the leadership of the parties as being ineffectual, as not accomplishing.....

Drexler: I agree. Obviously, you have one life only. If you are a foreigner who's not affected by what's going in this country you can have a historical perspective: in a few year's time, in a hundred year's time, everything will be like in western societies. Don't be impatient. When we are highly critical, it is legitimate because we have one life and everything that is mismanaged or handled incompetently affects our one life. When the government says to the pensioners that we just cannot raise the amount of the pensions now, those people cannot wait for the better times. They may die before the promised

better times set in. My firm conviction is that it is more and more unjustified to talk about the legacy of the Socialist regime as most of the current problems go back to the past fifteen years, the era of the new democracy. But the political class is unwilling to discuss the processes of the past fifteen years for which they share responsibility. You can no longer talk about the national debt, accumulated in the Kadar regime when the current Socialist government accumulated the same amount of debt in 3 years. If you ask a constitutional lawyer, a political analyst or a political scientist, I have a PhD in Political Science so I can regard myself as a specialist, why Parliament is dysfunctional, why the debates of the commissions prove a total farce, it is the selfish interests and corruption of the parliamentary parties that prevent them from making the work of the legislative body more productive in the interest of the public good. No wonder that all this alienates the ordinary citizen and they lose trust in the political institutions. We have a crisis of moral values as the new political class cannot set a moral example. The new propertied class better keep their mouths shut because they wouldn't be able to explain how they accumulated their wealth. In this country, you cannot name a Carnegie or Mellon that would have donated private funds for charitable purposes.

Thomas: The exception is Soros.

Drexler: But Soros is an American financier, though of Hungarian birth.

Thomas: He's over there. He's in the west.

Drexler: Yes. So in fact the new political or the propertied class cannot set a moral example. It's shameful that the parliamentary factions cannot agree on any issue that would require a two-thirds majority, it's a shame. In the end, the people conclude that politics is all about who can seize power and who can deceive the electorate more efficiently in order to be reelected.

Thomas: And I hear that the media plays a role in this too. The media is corrupt.

Drexler: The media is partial but that is a legacy of the past when the duty of the media was not to inform but to influence and to orient the public. Since the major organs are controlled by the same people as in the old regime, the media doesn't do what the essential duty of the media should be, to inform the people in an impartial manner.

Thomas: Well, no media is perfect at that. But I hear that money rules the media.

Drexler: It is not so much money that matters. The public service television, maintained from public funds is controlled by the government. The major commercial TV channels, three out of the four major daily papers are openly loyal to the Socialist-Free Democratic coalition and provide a biased coverage of the political events. That is not a healthy balance. Let's go back to the political parties. The parliamentary parties receive considerable funds from

the state budget for their operation, so there are certain legitimate expectations, such as an acceptable degree of competence. In 5 months we are going to have the next parliamentary elections and the parties have already created an intolerable atmosphere in the country. Now the election campaign is built more and more on lies and unfounded promises as the major parties act on the assumption that the elections can be won by the party that can mislead the public more successfully. The parties seem to be pleased with their performance and never search their souls. We may not be perfect, they say, but we are democratically elected. The Communist past is used as an instrument to divert attention from the current issues. That is why you have these belated initiatives and motions that the names of the informers and agents of the Communist secret police should be published. The same parliamentary parties did nothing to demand the disclosure of the names after the first free elections in 1990. So why is this fervor after so many years? Does that have any influence on our future, on our current affairs? It's a devious means of diverting the people's attention. To give you an example: it is brought to light that a well-know professor of the Budapest University of Economics reported on the immediate members of his family in the early '60's. Some of them were prominent members of the Nagy Imre government. He is ruined morally, needless to say, but I respectfully ask, what has changed? Nothing. What the country really needs today is honest politicians, but those in power believe that morality or honesty have nothing to do with politics.

Thomas: Do you have hope that this will change?

Drexler: Everything must change, because the country is in trouble. The national debt is so high that it has already triggered a so-called debt spiral. The deficit of the state budget became higher and higher with each year under the current government. If that trend cannot be stopped, it will eventually lead to a restrictive policy and the government is already under pressure from Brussels to introduce austerity measures in order to restore the fiscal balance. Hungary acceded to the European Union on May the first, 2004. The actual date of the accession is more or less symbolic because the country had started the adaptation to the laws and regulations of the European Union years ago. On the other hand, the discontent will grow if there are restrictive measures, The decisive majority of the people are in favor of western-type parliamentary democracy despite the negative experience with their own Parliament. In Budapest, you will not see demonstrators demanding a restoration of the old regime as in Moscow. I can only reiterate that the past is used as an excuse to divert attention from current issues. I certainly appreciate that there are many people who cannot get over the past because they want to know how and by whom their lives were ruined. Those who were persecuted because of their participation in the '56 events, those who couldn't earn a degree, couldn't get a decent job and have a very low pension today, those people want to know who is responsible for their misfortune. But the country cannot live in the past. A nation should concentrate on the present and the future and not move back and

forth in time. The true compensation for the misfortunes would be to raise the amount of their pension. If everything was in order, everything was running smoothly, then I would say yes, bring everything to light, analyze the past, all right, spend time and energies on the past, but that is not the case.

Thomas: What you're saying is, that referring to what happened then is being used to mislead the people instead of attacking current problems, from which people are suffering, such as low pensions.

Drexler: All right, that would be a fair summary of what I said. I respect that those demanding that we should open the pages of history have sincere motives because we lived in a police state after all.....

Thomas: But not mislead the people with that.

Drexler: Yes, you know, there are many people who firmly believe that it is important, for a society to face its past, I don't question that. What I say is that with the same effort, we should also demand that we talk about current issues. Because in many cases I find that the political parties are unwilling to talk about current issues. To give you another example, the current government tried to restrict the scope of information that is accessible to MP's in the opposition, which is again something totally unacceptable. To manipulate or withhold essential information about the financial affairs of the country.

Thomas: Have you had a chance to discuss the things that you had prepared, the notes that you had made, the topics that you wanted to bring up, have you had a chance to discuss with me.....

Drexler: I publish, you know.

Thomas: What I mean is, you said that you had thought about this and made some notes of those things you wanted to say. Have you had a chance to say those things?

Drexler: Oh yes.

Thomas: To me, in this interview? Okay, well, I just wanted to be sure I hadn't diverted you with my questions.

Drexler: No, you haven't. You know, you asked logical questions and I would have talked about those topics anyway. I wanted to gather my thoughts, because one doesn't always think about these things.

Thomas: I really appreciate so much your giving me so much time.

Drexler: Thank you very much for your attention. Maybe it was, maybe some of my views struck you?

Thomas: Yes, I've learned a lot.

Drexler: Have you?