

An Interview with Laszlo Fejer

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

Interviews conducted by
Virginia Major Thomas
in 2009

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Biography

Laszlo began his career as a part-time railway mechanic. More important to his employer, the Communist state, however, was his excellence as an ice hockey player in the railway company's sports team in a regime where no professional sports were allowed. But the railway company paid him only as a part-time mechanic, a salary on which he could not live. He became variously a railway engineer, a college student, a gas heater mechanic, a teacher and finally, after the political changes, the manager of a Danish company with international connections. He has many insightful comments on the life of a non-Communist worker in Communist Hungary. He added a letter about present-day Hungary after the interview was completed.

Miklos Jakabffy, translator

Thomas: This is Major Thomas on November 12, 2009, in Hungary, and we are talking to Laszlo Fejer, so let's begin by asking you where and when you were born and a little bit about your family, for background.

Fejer: I was born on November 27, 1947 in Budapest. Both my mother and father escaped from Transylvania to Hungary. My brother was born yet in Kolozsvar, it is Cluj-Napoca in Romanian, officially called. It is interesting because my father was working as a—what is that in English?

Fejer: Mechanic.

Fejer: As a mechanic at the Hungarian state railway company and my mum was a sales person in a shop, in a food shop in Budapest. My father died in 1950, so as I was 3 years old it was my mum who raised us alone.

Thomas: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Fejer: I have one brother, but it is 18 years difference in age between the two of us. He is my half-brother: when his mother died, then my father married the sister of my brother's mother.

Thomas: So he was born in Transylvania but you were born in Budapest.

Fejer: Yes.

Thomas: Where did you go to school?

Fejer: In the 13th district, on the Pest side.

Thomas: Elementary school?

Fejer: Yes.

Thomas: And did you go to gymnasium?

Fejer: No, I went to a trade school after I finished the 8 school years of elementary school. They had in German, that is, working on a semi-automatic machine, working on metal items—I'd have to look at a dictionary to find out what it is. When I graduated I was not working as a regular worker but I got a position for people who were good in sports. I did ice hockey.

Thomas: What year are we talking about?

Fejer: Between 1960 to 1968-69. You have to imagine that at that time in Communist countries there were no professional sports people. But you know

if you do something at a high level, like first class, what we say in Hungarian first class clubs or the elite of sports, then also at that time the sports people needed more practice time than what would have been allowed by a regular job, so this is why this is called a sports job, meaning that those persons having a sports job got the permission from their work place to go to trainings and to sports events.

Thomas: But you actually were a sportsman all the time. That was your job.

Fejer: Yes.

Thomas: But was this like a state-sponsored sport? It was for Hungary, it was for the Communist Republic of Hungary? Compared to a state-owned business?

Fejer: Yes. I was in the sports club of the Hungarian Railway Company, that is abbreviated in Hungarian as BVSC, and I got a job at the Hungarian Railway Company.

Practically I had to work daily about 4 hours a day, repairing the railway engine. The rest of his time was dedicated to the sport, not only that he loved it but this was also an expectation.

Thomas: Did the railway company have a preference for you to work on the engines or to be a sportsman? Which was the preference? Which was more important to the railway company, or to the state?

Fejer: This is one of the many antagonisms in Communism, that for the state as well as for the state-owned railway company, number one priority was that I was a sportsman, I was a first-class sportsman. But as it was not a professional sport, any professional sport was not available in Communist countries, by theory, this is why it was an expectation that everybody, as I myself, had to have literal work, and I had to work literally in my job.

Thomas: He was expected to do the engine repair and do the other, but the other was really more important to the state. How did you feel about this at that time?

Fejer: It was natural for him as for everybody else. He was born in this area so it was not only him but every quality sports person did the same. We practically didn't know anything else. The Hungarian Olympic champions were champions, they were not professionals, but they had the very same job situation. Everybody had to have a job.

Thomas: They had another job somewhere, besides being Olympic champions. How did this affect your personal life? Was it difficult? Was there for example a lot of pressure from the state to be good at the sport to go against England or France or the United States?

Fejer: The motivation was not an expectation on the side of the workplace or the state: we wanted to be better sports people. We were not permitted to travel anywhere around the world. It was exclusively a possibility for those few who were for example good in sports. This was for example the only chance to travel to Czechoslovakia. It was the very same for the East German sports people. They were not successful because they were so much talented, but it was the highest pressure because this was the only chance to travel abroad.

Thomas: And did you travel abroad?

Fejer: Practically we could not travel to the west, but we traveled with the sports around the east.

Thomas: What did you find when you traveled to the east? Was there a noticeable difference between life in Hungary and life in other countries in the east?

Fejer: No, but we could only travel with a valid passport to another Communist country but it was also a problem to travel to another Communist country. For example, to answer your former question, at that time when we traveled to Romania, we had a basically better life here in Hungary than the people in Romania, generally speaking.

Thomas: Then you didn't want to travel to other countries because you could buy things there that you couldn't buy in Hungary, for example, as you did, Nick, as an airline employee, you would go and buy things in foreign countries, although that was generally in the west, that you then bring back and sell here in Hungary to augment your salary. Was that true then?

Fejer: It was not a possibility.

Thomas: So you didn't find in Czechoslovakia or Poland or Romania things you could get that you couldn't get here in Hungary.

Jakabffy: No. But it was rather the other way round, that people were eager to get items from Hungary in other east bloc countries.

Thomas: Was it your impression that life was better in Hungary at that time than maybe in the other Communist countries? So you were happy to be living in Hungary?

Fejer: Yes, for two reasons. At that time in the schools we were raised to understand and acknowledge and appreciate that we were Hungarians. We were happy and proud that we were Hungarians.

Thomas: Was this because of the history of Hungary, the earlier history, or was it because you were Communists?

Fejer: My teachers graduated before Communism, so they lectured us and made us understand that we have reasons to be proud to be Hungarians because of our background and because of our history, not only because of the history but because of the background. So those teachers were not trained by Communism. As generations of younger teachers were employed, those who were raised and trained during Communism, they absolutely had no emphasis on communicating or teaching patriotism in schools at all.

Thomas: Were you taught Marxism, Leninism, Stalinism in school?

Fejer: No, it was not a lesson in the elementary schools. It started in the high school, part of the history, but not in the trade school. So you must understand the delicate situation I was in, not only himself but his fellow colleagues in the sport, that I have to be successful in sports but I got paid by my workplace. So when there was a minimum increase, pennies, in the salary, here and there it happened, I never got a salary increase because I was not a full-time worker. My results had to be collected in sports, but in sports there was no financial compensation. So as time passed, my relative income became less and less. This is what made me to learn a new job, and that was an engineer, to drive an engine at the railway. I graduated high school in the evening school classes, and parallel to that I had to learn and I qualified as an electric engine driver at the railway.

Thomas: And was it difficult to change from repairing engines, did the bosses care whether you changed from repairing engines to being a driver of the engines?

Fejer: They were happy when somebody wanted to work more, to achieve more, to do more.

Thomas: And for the engine driver you received a better salary.

Fejer: Yes, I got more, but I had to finish sports. During the training time I had to suspend sports.

Thomas: What about when you had learned to be an engine driver and you were driving engines, could you continue to do sports?

Fejer: At that time, you believe it or not, the engine driver had to work the working time. There was no favor for sports people and it happened that we had to work 24 hours a day as an electric engine driver. After 24 working hours one got 12 resting hours, and then you could restart again. There was absolutely no time for sports. As I became an engine driver, my work place became the west railway station. The line was electrified, and that was Budapest to the eastern border, at that time the Soviet Union, but the electrification was only in the first 50 or 60 kilometers, so it went step by step. (LF:) It is very important what I now tell you, because the first step, we were a young electric

engine driver in the west railway station who knows how the electric engine works.

Before it was electrified, it was only for workers, Communist party members or other reliable Communist people were permitted to drive so-called quick trains. There was the regular trains and the express trains, and there was a higher salary for the express train drivers. But those reliable Communist party people did not dare to drive the new electric engines because they did not have the knowledge of that work. This is how I got unexpectedly quickly a good and well-paid job with the railway. As the electrification went by sections farther and farther, it was the purpose to have the first electrified connection between Budapest and the Soviet border, I got to this line and that was a well-paid job. In the meantime, also the reliable Communist former regular traditional engine drivers learned and became experienced on electric engines, and they were demanding their well-paid positions back. So as I did not want to enter the Communist party, after a while I found myself out of this well-paid position.

Thomas: Even though you were trained for the electrification, it was more important to be a member of the Communist party than a good expert.

Fejer: Exactly.

Thomas: So when the Communist party members got their training, you were out and they were in.

Fejer: Exactly This is what has happened. Well, it was in each field of life not a priority to have a higher knowledge level or more experience, to have one job done, but that you had a capacity to take the job and you had to be a reliable person, a party person.

Thomas: A member of the party.

Jakabffy: Right.

Thomas: I have heard people say that everybody was equal under Communism but in fact people who were members of the party were favored. They had a better chance at jobs, higher pay. Is that right?

Fejer: We put it this way: everybody was equal, but those who were party members, had the red booklet, they were more equal.

Thomas: You didn't want to join the party. Why not?

Fejer: I never could have this Communist ideology, or consider this Communist ideology as my own, I couldn't agree with this ideology, that is the basic reason, but also on the other hand I am religious.

- Thomas: What is your religion?
- Fejer: Protestant.
- Thomas: But weren't there people who joined the party to get better jobs, to get better pay?
- To join the party for their own benefit, rather than because they believed.
- Fejer: Oh sure. There were many party members. This was proved at the time of the changes, when people really didn't need to be a party member to get or keep this preferred position, then they just left the party.
- Thomas: What was the basic conflict between your Protestantism and the Communist ideology?
- Fejer: The believer cannot be a Communist because Communists are materialists. The Communists declare that the material is basic and vital. They are excluding each other.
- Thomas: So what did you do then when the Communists learned to run the electric trains?
- Fejer: So I kept my job but I lost the express train driving. So I was driving the same electrified trains and the track trains, trains with pay load but not human load.
- Thomas: What we call freight trains.
- Fejer: My wife was working as an official, an officer but not a military officer but a railway officer and this is how we met, and we got to know each other and we liked each other and we married and got three children together. I wanted to continue my career at the railway so I volunteered for a new school at the railway which was a railway officer. They didn't let me get into this higher education, although I had at this time my high school graduation. But they never said why they didn't let me. Obviously it was because I was not a party member. The railway didn't let me study, to continue, to improve my knowledge. So I wanted to show off so I continued my studies at a public college. As an engine driver I had studied and I sometimes had my books during work. Just to show you, to give you another example of the situation, we were about 500 people in what we may call a garage for the trains or for the engines, it was 500 people and there was only one single person who had the education for an engineer. The leader of the entire complex of 500 engine drivers had not even a high school graduation but he was a party member. I assume that among the 500 people there were a maximum of 15 or 20 people who had a high school graduation. This is what was to be foreseen when I started my studies at the college, so my education degree was anyhow several

levels higher than the boss's. But for the time I graduated from the college it was an extremely high difference between our qualifications.

Thomas: The question that comes to me is, if you were not a Communist party member, was it a state college so that the state paid for your extra education, or did you have to pay for it?

Fejer: At that time education was practically free.

Thomas: So you could go ahead and get advanced education with no cost to you?

Fejer: There was some cost, because you had to buy the books, you had to buy the instruments and necessary devices that you needed, but practically for the education you did not pay.

Thomas: So anybody who wanted to could do this. You had to want to.

Fejer: Yes, but there was an entrance exam. About 80% or more at the entrance exam didn't pass. So it was a high level.....

Thomas: So of those 500 people working there who were not qualified, they could have gone, they could have qualified.

Fejer: Maybe, but nobody wanted to.

Thomas: But you wanted to. And you had taken the trouble to get a high school degree in night school.

Fejer: So it was not a simple effort next to a daily job, but with a family behind, well, it was definitely not easy. And I had a very strong background in my family, support.

Thomas: So what happened to you?

Fejer: It was 4 years for the college. Even when I graduated from college, I couldn't get a better job simply wherever I went, so without being a party member I couldn't become a leader of 5 or 6 people. So they suggested I leave the company, the railway company. So with this college degree and a recommendation to leave the railway company, I had to find a new job and I had to start a new career, and I started to repair gas-operated devices.

Thomas: It sounds as if political affiliation ruled.

Fejer: Yes. So I became a gas mechanic with a college degree, practically it was an engineering degree.

Thomas: Did you need the degree?

- Fejer: Not at all.
- Thomas: You were overeducated for the job.
- Fejer: Yes. My work became to go to homes, to individual flats, to repair either hot water equipment or heaters.
- Thomas: Were you working for yourself or for a state-owned company?
- Fejer: This was a state-owned company, it was officially a Gun and Gas Device Producing Company, it is a funny combination but this was its name. I liked this job, it was an interesting job, I had the possibility to meet different people. Every day there were ten jobs to be done, so every day I met ten different people.
- Thomas: Could you support your family? Did you get decent pay?
- Fejer: It was a better pay but I got tips from the people.
- Thomas: You didn't get tips as a railway engineer. Did the tips help the amount of income?
- Fejer: It increased the income. It was a substantial part of my income. Obviously first I had to learn this part of my trained business, and when I knew it well I started to train colleagues and lecture colleagues. Practically where I worked I was working for this big state-owned company, but the smaller company where I worked that was a service office of this big company, to service those machines which were produced by the company. After a while my position became quite vital because we were lecturing people not only within the company but around the country and not only those who required our services, these furnaces, but also the people at the Hungarian National Gas Supply Company. In the meantime I also completed and graduated from another college which was for teachers. This is the second graduation. And this was very good luck for me because the high-ranked Communist party leaders had gas furnaces imported from western Germany from the company called Junkers, and there was nobody in this country who knew them. So I was among those few who were delegated by the company to learn this field in the West German production company.
- Thomas: So you became an essential person for the company.
- Fejer: As a mechanic, yes. So it was in the year 1977 when I first went to a western country, to West Germany, delegated by the company.
- Thomas: But when you went back to college as a gas engineer, where are we in time?

Fejer: It was in 1977 when I collected my degree as a high voltage electric engineer. So the teacher's degree was added in '81 or '82.

Thomas: I'm trying to get a sense of how things changed not only with your job but in the years, how life changed, what you could do, because people tell me they could do more, they could take second jobs, they could have second businesses in the '80's.

Fejer: One of the advantages was that this biggest state-owned gas device-producing company delegated me, but the other luck and advantage was that our company put the so-called Grundfos, Danish-made pumps into the furnaces, and this company, my workplace company, became the so-called service company in Hungary for the Grundfos production company of Denmark. And in the same year, 1977 and '78, we were delegated to go to Germany and Denmark to learn to work with these pumps. I was lucky because at both companies, both Junkers and Grundfos, I met friendly people and we became friends with those colleagues. So I just mention it because later you will find how important this was in my career.

Thomas: But I have heard before that there was a change in the political attitude. In the '80's one lady told me her husband could get a second job because they could buy space and make a tennis court and he could teach tennis; there was allowed secondary businesses for individuals. But this sounds as if there were also technology changes too. There was new technology that drove businesses.

Fejer: Yes, absolutely right.

Thomas: So there's something else involved besides the loosening of the Kadar government, there's also technological development.

Fejer: They wanted to persuade me to enter the party at my workplace, so there was still strong Communism. I never had a second job; I did my job and studied after my work hours. I did each of my work with maximum effort.

Thomas: But looked ahead and got further education.

Fejer: So after we had these German- and Danish-made devices we could practically travel or had to travel once a year or maximum twice a year, or every other year.

Thomas: Was this related to his work or.....

Fejer: It was education, it was always a need of the work.

Thomas: Was there also a loosening of the restrictions on travel for everybody?

Fejer: This was just for 2 or 3 people in this company. Practically it was 5 people generally traveling together. There were 5 of us, but I was the only person who knew the job. The others were the party secretary, the department leader, the interpreter.

Thomas: What kind of a passport did you have then?

Fejer: It was a different passport, what was called a professional business passport. Each passport was only valid to travel where it was issued to. Each passport was generally valid either to the east bloc countries or to the west of the world, but you could only travel by the stamp in your passport. Anybody could have had a passport, which took you nowhere. With a valid passport you couldn't travel. The passport needed a travel permit, which was issued for a certain period and for a certain destination. But to get that travel permit you needed to get approved by your boss at your workplace. At the same time it had to have the signature of the trade union leader, who was a Communist party member, and the Communist party secretary, the strong man of the Communist party, and the general manager of your workplace.

Thomas: But it wasn't one of those passports that you get only every three years.

Fejer: That was for other staff; it needed the same but it was for other staff. At that time we didn't even request a western travel permit.

Thomas: The '70's?

Fejer: The '80's. The children were about 18 when we first went as a family to the western countries, specifically to Italy.

Thomas: So what impressed you about that first trip to the west? Either the private or by the company.

Fejer: The first company trip was in '77, when I first went to Germany. It was a tremendous, horrible difference between life in Hungary and in West Germany.

Thomas: What was the major difference?

Fejer: That you could buy anything in the west. It was a hot summer day and I wanted to buy 10 bottles of beer. It was available in the shop [in Hungary] but the shop had a restriction to serve only 2 bottles to one person, so you couldn't buy 10 bottles, you could only buy 2. You either had to tip the vendors or.....

Thomas: I have been told that you could get anything in Hungary if you paid under the counter.

Fejer: We wanted to buy some oranges or bananas in Advent or Christmas time for the children, it was only available in the period before Christmas, but one had to do the line for 30 minutes to 2 hours to get it. This was for us the amazing difference, that bananas or oranges and everything were always available and I could buy 10 bottles of beer unlimited. So we practically didn't know certain items, we speak about fruits. In Hungary you never ever saw veal in a butcher shop or a beefsteak in a butcher shop; in Germany, yes. This was one side of the basic differences. The other basic difference was at the workplace. We worked one week among the workers. In the western company, whether German or Danish, there was all the time all spare parts available. This was not normal. In a western country there was a different atmosphere in the workplace. The workers, the same basic skilled workers, were working efficiently quietly, and relaxed. They were not under any push, or pressure, as we were, so it was a different atmosphere. So you understand what I'm talking about, in Hungary we got paid for the production, that one machine or item had to be assembled, but when one spare part was not there, the worker had to see that he gets it, otherwise he can't complete his job, so he had to leave his job to run and get the missing part, and that was a lot of pressure. In the western world there was somebody responsible to get the worker all necessary spare parts at his workplace. So it was a different organization.

Thomas: Yes, I see. How did that make you feel?

Fejer: I came home and asked why couldn't we do it that way? Jakabffy: And I added another question: what did the party secretary who was with you traveling for nothing say? The answer was, there was no change possible because everybody, the party secretary as well as the department leader, wanted to hold his position and was absolutely not interested in any change.

Thomas: Did this make you see that "the changes" were coming? That the Communist system wasn't going to work?

Fejer: No, I never thought....the Soviet army presence in Hungary and the Communist party organization was so strong. I have seen what was the difference in life in the west and why it was that way, I could recognize that, but when I wanted to change it for the better here I got hit on my head and not only me but anybody who wanted to change it.

Thomas: So what happened to you when the changes came? Did the company collapse?

Fejer: Everything became uncertain at my workplace. Nobody had an idea what will happen, whether we would keep our workplace. Ever since I was born I grew up in a society where everything was set, everybody was told what to do, and how much and how far you can go. So we couldn't count or see whether this company will work next year, whether this company will exist. We obviously couldn't buy or take over the company because we had no money. Those who were in control were all party people. We were dreaming or hoping that either

Junkers or another western company will buy our production factory and then we will become western workers.

Thomas: I have heard people say that they were so happy, everybody was so happy when the changes came, but it sounds scary.

Fejer: We were believing and hoping that the changes were positive and we were much, much more naïve because we were thinking or believing or hoping that sooner or later we will get to the same level where the western workers, not managers or owners, where the western workers were. But everything was uncertain, everything was scary. Yes, we could travel, if we had the money, if we had the funds, the possibility, yes, it existed. This is how the aforementioned points got importance, because both western companies found me, to offer me a job, but luckily the Junkers didn't keep their promise and this is how I didn't sign with them, and this is how I signed with the other company. So it was some months later the other company found me.

Thomas: It was very valuable to have contacts in the west, and not everybody had that.

Fejer: Yes, absolutely. Definitely they contracted with me because they trusted me. I was commissioned to organize the company here. At the beginning it was an unlimited service company for Grundfos, where I became the leader. They didn't want any political or other dedication for that!

Thomas: There was no political control over what you did.

Fejer: By the Danish company, no. And there was no possibility [of prevention by the Hungarian government]. This happened in '91. Actually it was the Danish company who founded the Hungarian daughter company of the Danish main company, and then the Danes, the owners, appointed me the leader. They commissioned me entirely to build up the local and the Hungarian company all over the country.

Thomas: So you succeeded with the changes. You were not unemployed.

Fejer: In this respect, yes. When I started these western connections, German was the necessary foreign language, and I had to learn German, and I succeeded to master German. Unfortunately the Danish company changed the official language of the company to English at the end of the '90's, and I was obliged to study English.

Thomas: But in every respect, in every way, except knowing first German and then English, you were prepared for this job. You were ready, you were educated in every way except knowing the language. I'm thinking of what Louis Pasteur said, "Chance favors the prepared mind". If you're prepared for all kinds of things, then what happens chooses you because you're ready.

Fejer: He is a modest guy. He says that maybe it is not the one who has the knowledge but the one who is open for that. But then I contradicted him and said but you could be open for the job but then you would not have had the knowledge. But on the other hand it is also very important that those guys, both in Germany and in Denmark, knew that Laszlo Fejer does the job 100% reliable.

Thomas: Yes, it was a combination of things, your knowledge, your knowing them, their knowing you. But if you hadn't been ready, if you hadn't been trained, they wouldn't have chosen you.

Jakabffy: Definitely they knew the party secretary and the department head, and they didn't choose them.

Fejer: I concluded that it was lucky for me. But I wanted to mention about the changes. From a mechanic I became a manager at a western company, and that was obviously a good outcome for me. I worked 18 years for them. So this is an international company; they have daughter companies in the United States and in North America as well as in Australia and 52 countries around the world. I was just one leader in one country but I found friends in other countries and we were good colleagues, good friends. Just as an example, when my daughter with her family got a health problem in Spain, I just called a Spanish colleague of mine and they gave them a Spanish-English interpreter because my daughter didn't speak Spanish and the Spanish people didn't speak English. So they got help with a Spanish-English interpreter and got the help they needed. And I had a chance to travel around the world with this company.

Thomas: So for you after the changes things were really much better.

Fejer: Yes, my personal life became much better and in this respect easier. But I expected from the changes what never happened.

Thomas: What did you expect from the changes?

Fejer: I hoped that also in the Hungarian economy there would be the same laws ruling as in Germany or Denmark or England.

[End of Interview]

Translation of the letter from Laszlo Fejer of February 15, 2010 by Miklos Jakabffhy

There is no need to change anything in the interview.

In answer to the question, what did you expect from the changes, I would say this. As a mechanic repairing heating/water devices from 1977, I had a different chance to see what was not common for other Hungarian citizens to see, namely the homes of the political elite in Hungary. At that time, foreign currency couldn't be owned except by the elite and Communist party members, informers of the party, and secret service members; these could take jobs abroad and have hard currency. These lived in elite districts built for them or in homes whose owners were chased out of them. They were unashamed and could do what they wanted. I also took advantage of my connection and got a private telephone line after 15 years of waiting. I expected from the political changes that a new elite would be from honorable and valuable experts who can direct the economy and whose abilities would not be controlled depending on their political behavior. But today there is no change, either they remained in positions or got even better positions because of their connections. They educate their children in elite schools or abroad, there is no change in their attitudes. They control power, they have no sympathy for the people building the nation. I am sorry to add that my view is the same for the leaders of the political elite in your country, also the same in Western Europe, and they cooperate with the so-called Hungarian elite. The past 60 years of the Hungarian economy has been controlled by the same group. People here are no longer able to believe in justice or a better future or in peace or in the honor of one's word or in the safety of our children. Words have lost their meaning. A legally elected prime minister confessed he lied morning, noon and night. Such a morally dead person would resign in the west but this one didn't and western leaders accepted him as their equal. The Hungarian people don't know if this is true or another lie. They feel no possibility of change and don't believe in change, and I think this is horrible.