

An Interview with Marton Ledniczky

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

Marton Ledniczky calls himself “an artist of film”. He is an independent documentary film producer. The son of a lawyer, he was born and brought up in Budapest during the Communist era. He went to a theater and cinema high school, and both before and after he went to this school, he trained in his profession by working his way up in a state-owned film company. At this time, there were taboo subjects, although among the equal film makers some were more equal than others, and film which questioned government policy a little was used by the governing party as a tension release. He discusses what changed and what remained the same in the film business after 1989.

In the interview there is a wide-ranging discussion. It includes his awareness, when growing up, of different philosophies of history which were not taught in Communist schools, and his awareness as a student of censorship and of terror during the Communist regime. He discusses more fully the conditions in Hungary after the fall of Communism, both new freedoms and new tyrannies of a political, economic, social, familial and media-related nature. He compares the situation of Hungary with western countries and Hungary under Communist and capitalist governments.

MT: Major Thomas

ML: Marton Ledniczky

MJ: Miklos Jakabffy (translator)

MT: This is Major Thomas on the 15th of November, 2005, and I am at Csorsz utca 5 in Budapest with my translator, Miklos Jakabffy, and we are interviewing Marton Ledniczky. And I think we might start out by asking you, Marton, where and when you were born and a little bit about your parents.

ML/MJ: I was born in 1954, 11 of March, here in Budapest.

MY: And who were your parents?

ML/MJ: Andre Gabor Ledniczky, he was a lawyer, and my mother was Marian Loky and she worked with the family, at home. She was born not far from here, a couple of blocks away.

MT: And your father was also a native of Budapest?

ML/MJ: No, my father is from Tizsasuly, that is at the Tisza River, the family had some land there.

MT: Tell me about your schooling, where you went to school, what you learned and all that.

ML/MJ: I finished my basic schools in Budapest, it was the Eotvos Josef high school, and after the high school, the theater and cinema high school also in Budapest.

MJ: That is a college.

ML/MJ: Today it is a university.

MT: What did you study in high school?

ML/MJ: I was interested in the human subjects.

MT: I'm particularly interested in what kind of history you studied.

ML/MJ: That was set up by the school so it was general, universal history, international and Hungarian. We have had no choice, it was a absolute general policy

MT: And did you study this from the point of view of Marxism? Or did you have a variety of philosophies or points of view?

ML/MJ: This is a good question. In Hungary we always had a double understanding, that was between the family, and it was the same for the professors as well as for the students, officially naturally it was Marxism-Leninism, the basics, but it was very much influenced by the person, how the teacher performed and interpreted.

MT: How did your teacher.....

ML/MJ: And then also how the family, the parents, explained that. Officially one had to learn and take exams on the official version. But we knew very well that the truth is somewhere out there other than it was in the books.

MT: You got this double view with your family, not necessarily from the teachers. Did the teachers agree with your family? did they teach it with a kind of.....

ML/MJ: It depended in the case of the teachers how daring they were. Some people, professors, were not afraid of telling the truth. Some told what was in the books. My generation had to pick up from these sources and put the picture together. And it was the very same in the media, you could listen to the news in the official radio broadcasts, and everybody listened to Radio Free Europe broadcast from Munich by the United States or the Voice of America the same, and then we could imagine what might have been the truth in between the two.

MT: I have the feeling that you were not a convinced Marxist.

ML/MJ: Not at all. One has to understand that before World War II Hungary was more on the liberal or rightist side, meaning that the intellectual families or those families who had a little land or some wealth, they were not on the Communist side. Later it also turned out that even the party leaders, there were very few of them who were dedicated and what we would say "Communist believers", they were just career Communists. And that became obvious after the revolution of 1956.

MT: And you, your family, your parents and you were not Communist party members.

ML: No!

MT: When you got out of school, you went to work in film and TV? Press too, or mostly film?

ML/MJ: Before I got into the college, I spent a few years working in the only movie factory that was available, a state movie company, and I started low and climbed up different levels and worked myself up. Then I had 4 years in the college and then I continued the same with a degree.

MT: And did you find that what you could do in films was in any way limited by the state or by the political outlook or situation?

ML/MJ: By all means. One can say simply that there were taboos, topics that you couldn't touch, you couldn't mention. It was obvious that nobody came to the idea to make a movie about the revolution of 1956 or about why the great and glorious freedom-bringing Red Army soldiers are stationed in Hungary forever. In Hungary other than these Soviet questions, other than the revolution of 1956 and Imre Nagy, who was the at-that-time Communist leader who became one of the leaders of the revolution, other than these topics, in Hungary all other topics were very liberally treated by the party management compared to other east bloc countries.

MT: This was goulash Communism.

ML: Absolutely! But also in film factories or in the media; in films it was a little better, of course the television was very strict and the radio. Press and film were more free.

MT: What did you make films about, what was the subject you dealt with?

ML/MJ: I got my college grade in '79. My career started in 1980, actually, and that dictate was already the opening dictate, because in 9 years, actually in 1989, the changes started. And during those years, developing during the '80's, it was also possible to mention even the topic of the revolution of '56 like a tragedy of the nation, it was not Marxist-Leninist topic but not a taboo anymore.

MT: It wasn't a "counterrevolution" anymore, it was "an uprising of the Hungarian people."

MJ: We mentioned the revolution of '56, during the '80's, as "the events of 1956".

ML: The "events", yes, that was the expression, the "events".

ML/MJ: In the official setting it was still the "counterrevolution".

MT: I have heard that Istvan Szabo made films that were criticisms of Communism, but not a direct head-on argument against Communism but coming at an angle so they were a metaphor or simile he used. Did you do that kind of thing too, an indirect criticism of Communism?

ML/MJ: There are two topics which come up to me. I am not sure that it is the most important, but when you mentioned Istvan Szabo you must understand, we have mentioned the taboos, there were some, a few, a couple, who were more equal among the equals, who got more freedom and more liberty to mention certain topics, and only they, those chosen, might have mentioned more of those taboo topics. It was the so-called valves of the arts and humor, where certain chosen ones were permitted publicly to criticize the at-that-time official politics but only to let the steam, the energy, the tension of the people go, that you could hear a topic in the cabaret or you could say from a part of the movie, oh this is daring, and we say this was a glimpse of the politicians and the artists that they were permitted to say within frames.....

MT: So this is official criticism, it was approved.....

MJ: We say it was window-shopping.....

MT: It was window-dressing. How did you feel about working in this setting at this time? Did you feel you had to be very careful, you were very limited in what you could do? What was your experience of this situation?

ML/MJ: There was anxiety that you would lose something if you do more, if you mention more, then you would definitely lose something that you might have achieved because of your work, because of your luck, because of your talent, because artists as well as young daring people disappeared very rapidly.....

MT: From the country?

ML/MJ: From the country also but from the media life or from the artistic life. It means that you have seen for a while their name among artists or among movie people or among journalists, and all of a sudden you didn't notice it for a few months, that I don't see this name, and then it was again not wise to search for where did he or she disappear. Step by step slowly everybody got one-half step ahead, so we always did a little more, but it was slow but forward procedure.

MT: You did a little more but you only did a little.

ML/MJ: Yes. During the '80's in Hungary it was not anymore any tragedy, I mean there were not many tragic cases, not as for example in the German Democratic Republic or in Czechoslovakia, these were the classical Communistic cases, where people were literally taken to prison or were forced to leave the country.

MT: Of course Havel went to prison.

ML/MJ: Yes, of course Havel is a good example.

MT: Did this change after 1989?

ML/MJ: Many things did change.

MT: What changed?

ML/MJ: (laughs) This is a hard question. That definitely has changed, that is, you can speak about everything, and you can make movies about all topics. That hasn't changed, that those artists and press people who are closer to those on the high level of politics and economy, they can do more.

MT: Who can do more?

ML/MJ: Those who are closer to the politicians.

MT: You're talking about the journalists, the film makers.....

ML/MJ: You probably do not understand. This is a small country, here everybody knows everybody, especially those closer to the arts, like press, like movies. It was the very same during Socialism, Communism. Those who are in good connection with the political leaders, they play tennis together, they go jogging together, they go horseback riding together, they go out to dinner together, and they have more room and more finances. But what really did change, in one sentence, the power of politics has been replaced by the power of money.

MT: Can journalists, film makers, people in the arts, mount, that is to say, start real criticism of capitalism, of democracy? Can you criticize what is now the political situation?

ML/MJ: Yes. It has been experienced by those in power that if somebody does criticism, it doesn't change a lot, so it is mostly free to talk. Every day we can experience a new scandal somewhere. So if you like this topic, then the criticism of capitalism is about being starting in

this country now, as some in this country realize now that we didn't want this, what we have now. What is called now democracy, so-called democracy.

MT: And it may not change anything, but you're saying it is possible to criticize? And to keep on criticizing?

ML/MJ: Yes.

MT: But that is different from under the previous political system?

ML/MJ: It is emphasized that you can talk freely, even if you keep talking the same it doesn't change anything. It is like in the United States, in this respect: criticism is permitted but nothing changes, so decisions are made on a different level. This was the stupidity of Communism, when somebody could read it in writing that there is no milk or no bread available in the shops then the system will collapse. Those were primitive people and primitive people are more anxious for simple things as well.

MT: I don't understand that.

MJ: The Communist leaders at the beginning were primitive people without sophistication, and they thought if somebody puts down that no milk and no bread is available in the shops, that was the everyday belief, everybody had every day belief but you couldn't read it in the press.

MT: It was everybody's experience but nobody said it.

ML/MJ: Now it is permitted to criticize anything, but nothing changes with criticism. You can get everything, but you don't have the means, the money to get it. In the recent period Hungary is being called a country without consequences because the sharpest criticism that you can read sometimes in the press, that you would expect that article would end up in the law court because it would cause suits, there are facts about people that you could sue either the person or the journalist, nothing happens because it is evident that some mishandling did happen and this is why the person doesn't sue the journalist, and the journalist wants to survive and this is why he doesn't sue or initiate legal proceedings against the person he writes about, the critics, which could end up in a country with consequences that the person should end up in jail. Complicated, but true.

MT: It is complicated. I think that sometimes happens everywhere, that there are no consequences, but in the United States sometimes there are.

ML/MJ: We understand that in real democracies sometimes some political leaders, some ministers, resigned because they realized they did something not correct or it has been proved that they did some mishandling. In Hungary such things never happen.

MT: Do you think this is the situation because in Hungary there is not a longer tradition or experience of democracy? Is it because you're not used to consequences, making people be responsible? You know, in the United States people are always talking about people have to be responsible for their actions. Maybe there is not this tradition in Hungary?

ML/MJ: These are difficult questions and you should make studies about what happened recently. Hungary hasn't gotten such a long tradition of democracy, true. Even if we had had tradition everything happened quickly. So the elite in power are the same people more or less no matter what color they have on, red, yellow, blue. And those who are close to the people, the elite, they are also more or less the same, the client tail, we would say. This is why the people or the citizens are left out of these processes. There was another statement by a popular humorist who says "Corruption is what I'm not involved in". So this is a country of 10 million citizens, and there is a little elite, who either just themselves change colors or are behind those who have a colored coat on and make them move to their liking because they have the economic power.

MT: And the 10 million citizens do not force the elite to be responsible for ethical, legal acts?

ML/MJ: I live here and this is why I'm forced to say this is a naïve question on your side.

MT: Why?

ML/MJ: Because of what we were mentioning before now, and Hungary is a small power between of the interests of major powers and we just do among those powers. And the leaders are doing the same, like friendship as they did earlier toward the Russian Communists they do the same friendship toward the European Union or the American leaders. This is why it is naive to think that the people will force the people in power to do what the people would like.

MT: So do you experience life as the same? The political situation, the economic situation doesn't matter fundamentally, life does not change, it is hopeless, there is no possibility of hope. Is this the attitude in Hungary today?.

ML/MJ: Well, the mood of the society is quite low. I just realized there are even no more demonstrations.

MT: When were there demonstrations? Under Communism?

ML/MJ: No, not during Communism, but after Communism we had some demonstrations but recently there is none.

MT: Do you think the Hungarian people have given up? That things can't be changed, you might as well get along as best you can?

ML/MJ: That is a philosophical question. It is obvious that those in power can do anything with the people. We can mention different spheres or jobs or interests, there are teachers, the people working in the health system, they are desolate, desperate, and it may happen again for a 3rd time as it has already happened twice, that the prisoners will be democratically elected to be leaders.

MT: The prisoners?

ML/MJ: The prisoners elect the prison guards to be their leaders. People forget very quickly. This is too complicated, too difficult to understand for people from a free world, for Americans,

this is very difficult to understand for those who are so-called experts of the region, for politicians who say they know about this region.

MT: So things have not really changed, things are not better or more hopeful, or are they?

ML/MJ: There was an unbelievably high demand for changes in '89. At that time the people were full of hope, of ambition, of power to do whatever is needed. As it became evident, slowly, year by year, the people became desperate, desolate, and such a nation cannot initiate new things. You cannot make a revolution when you are sad and desolate.

MT: Yes and hopeless, you don't make a revolution then.

ML/MJ: I feel basic problems, for example, solidarity among people has gone, has been lost.

MT: Solidarity?

ML/MJ: Feelings, one person towards the other. During Communism, it was much bigger, solidarity among humans, let's say against Communism.

MT: You had a common enemy Everybody had the same enemy, so that brought them together.

ML/MJ: Definitely, that is for sure, that human relations were incomparably richer than these days. This is, if you like, criticism of capitalism. What we thought earlier would be different.

MT: I've been told that people had no notion it would be so difficult, that the Hungarian people didn't realize in '89-'90,

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ML/MJ: It was quite difficult during the dictatorship, and everybody obviously expected that life will be easier. But that there would be so much injustice as exists, that nobody anticipated. Not even the high politicians anticipated that. That we will be in the hands of, however you say it, the big powers or the oil magnates or the wars, in one word, the basics haven't changed. And we haven't mentioned that the media is a partner in arranging and keeping this, it is unbelievably high the effect of the media, which makes the people and destroys the way of thinking, or actually the thinking of humans.

MT: And the media, or at least some of the media, are not taking the role of being the informers of people, telling the people what's really going on and acting as positive critics?

ML/MJ: I say not even a little bit. So the valves which would work today, they can be heard on the radio before 6 in the morning or after midnight.

MT: You mean that's when the media tells the truth?

ML/MJ: No. We have a media reality. What is the people's understanding? The people's understanding is what is available from the media, and this is why we say it is not reality. If we

have the media reality, it is the media which tells us what is the reality. That is not only valid for Hungary, but it is very especially valid for Hungary. Here we do not even have the slightest number of journalists who would really work for the real facts. There is no responsibility.

MT: I think you know what I am getting at. In the United States of course there are journalists, media, who are more interested in making money than telling the truth. But there are some who try to get as much of the truth as they can. They don't always succeed. But as with the New York Times reporter who made up stories, fiction, and presented them as facts, he was fired, he was pilloried, for lying. And there is the attempt, not always successful, for the media to be what Jefferson talked about, you can't have a free society without a free press that informs and criticizes, there is an attempt to do this. This is not true in Hungary, is that what you're saying?

ML/MJ: From the early hour when people get up until the late hour when people get unconscious and fall into bed, the media radiates a picture of the society that is absolutely made up, and wherever you turn, wherever you listen, wherever you look, it is the same. If there is someone there who says something different it either goes down or goes to the heaven but that is very rare. It doesn't really matter, but it is either the voice of the politicians who one day say this is true, the next day or one week later say the opposite, it does not matter at all, from the same people different statements. For it is the economic leaders' work, which is coming from the media, who tell us what to buy. If you buy what I say then you will be happy. Because the media tells you what to buy, what to do, and if you do so you will be happy, people hear that from morning til late, so this makes people think this is the only possibility. If you do that, then you also elect those we want to be elected, and this is not pretty, what is tragic is that it works.

MT: To get people elected who will support pushing goods, selling, making money.

MJ: This is working, that the media tells us what to do. There are those factors who tell the media what to say and what not, so the media radiates what to do, what to say, how to live, who to elect, and this works.

MT: Now, Marton, you worked in the media. What do you do about this?

ML/MJ: I am not a journalist. If you like, I am an artist of film. So I am interested in the people, how they are part or are connected with events or the history or the society. So this is my approach and this is a different question. If these movies are at all broadcast or not, if they are broadcast they are broadcast between 6 and midnight, or between midnight and 6.

MT: Are you the only one working in the media who is interested in the relations of people to the political situation, to the history, are you the only one doing films like the one you're doing now about the gymnasium/college for the children of the '56 refugees, are you the only one doing this?

ML/MJ: I am a little bolt in the big machine.

MT: Are you the only bolt like you? Are you a unique bolt?

ML/MJ: No, by no means. My generation, we had absolutely different hopes and dreams of what will be the situation when we will be there doing movies and films. What we say today is we were differently socialized, it is not me, I am not unique, it is us, it is for us difficult to find our place in the machinery. And we see as everyday experience we see young people, not only young people, people who show up, immediately suddenly they are given the options, they are given the possibilities, they say what they have to say and then they disappear, because this media is not interested in getting people who are thinking or who are thinking deeper.

MT: Do you think the fact that you were socialized under the earlier political regime makes you more concerned with other people, the community, the political situation, the history, the historical tradition, because you were socialized under Communism are you more concerned with those things than people who are socialized now? Or being socialized now?

ML/MJ: If you like, this was our fault or our mistake or our naivete, that we had made up dreams for that time when we would get there that the world will be a better world, this is what we had hoped during Communism, and then we will be given the possibility of free work in a free world. What happened, what are the facts now, the world changed, definitely the world changed, that is another question, whether it is a better world or not. This world definitely does not need us.

MT: But maybe it does. But I'm thinking.....

ML/MJ: But basically we are not needed for what we are socialized for. So it doesn't mean that I do not have everything or I am unemployed or I do not find my existence or living. It does mean that people with their own way of thinking, their own ideas, people like that are not needed.

MT: I'm thinking of the hopes and dreams you had for another day were a reaction to the Communist world, and in a sense Communism produced something good in the hopes and dreams. I have had people say that under Communism, however, there were certain things that do not happen now. A lady who worked in a factory told me that there was more sense of community, of caring for each other, under Communism than there is now. That's a kind of positive influence of Communism, that was better than it is now. The dreams were a reaction against Communism, this is a reaction for Communism. I guess I'm wondering if Communism is still here in its influence, either negative or positive. What am I trying to say? I guess I want to know how the previous system, political and economic, still influences the way you think, either the way you criticize what's going on today or the way you live and work today.

ML/MJ: There were plenty of questions in your philosophy. But one is for sure, and that is especially true for Hungary, that we have to see and understand that during and in Communism, not everything was bad or wrong. Not mentioning that we were young and we had a happy life because we were young, not mentioning this, but just especially in Hungary because during the '70's and '80's, when for example in Romania Ceausescu was strong and in power, probably there almost everything about Communism was bad and wrong, and in Hungary there were many things which were good. So if you look at the field of culture and art, in Hungary in the '60's and '70's, as after World War II everywhere, there was a big boom of culture and art that was the same, it was present in Hungary. Obviously we have to take out the revolution of 1956, we have to take out the presence of the Soviet army in Hungary dominating the east bloc, aside from these

problems art was flourishing. What we have seen, it was a boom in the western world, if you like, overseas in the American continent or in western Europe. And what we have seen during the '60's, during the '70's, that was what we had hoped was capitalism, what was that time existing in western Europe or overseas. So this is what we hoped and dreamed of. It is bad luck, it is a tragedy, it is our misfortune, that by the time we got freedom, in the western world, western Europe as well as the American continent, there was a sort of economical crisis or the economics turned over and it was not such a boom as it had been decades earlier. and the same is valid for culture and art, in the west as well.

MT: Do you think capitalism is the same after Communism as before or is it maybe worse?

MJ: I don't understand the question. Is capitalism worse or better before and after Communism? We didn't live before Communism so we don't have experience of how was capitalism before World War II, or what do you refer to?

MT: I wonder if there is a reaction after the fall of Communism that makes capitalists prouder of their system and more dogmatic about it, more certain that they are right, less capable of self-criticism and the adjustment that comes with that, than before when maybe they were challenged by Communism and weren't quite so self-satisfied. Is there more self-satisfaction in capitalism since the fall of Communism? Do you know the expression "comes on stronger"? It is pushed more, more triumphant and more self-confident and more than self-confident. I guess what I'm getting at is, do you have the feeling that capitalism now is trying to force itself, particularly the American version of democracy and capitalism, is trying to force itself on everybody when maybe it doesn't fit everywhere. Does that make sense? I mean the glorification of capitalism!

ML/MJ: If it was a question, yes. If it was a theory, then I agree. It is obvious that capitalism needed an enemy. Then capitalism had to prove how good it was against the other. And because there is no challenge, this is why there is big suffering all around, no matter what continent, what country, there are problems. Just those on the former west were on a higher level of life standards, of economy, than us here in the eastern end of central Europe. Because we would like to raise, to go upwards.

MT: So you in saying that are accepting the value system of America, and the problem then seems to be that you cannot achieve the same level of living as the west, rather than saying it isn't necessary to live at that level to achieve whatever you want to achieve. If you say you want to live at the American standard of living, you are saying that that is your goal, as opposed to criticizing that, the American point of view, that money is so important. I'm coming from a criticism of America today, it's what I see as a kind of imperialism and a placing of possession of money and possessions and a high living standard as the goal of life, of society, as opposed to you don't have to live that high, it's better to see that the poor are taken care of, that those in need are helped. I think to say that you want to live on that level is to accept that that's the goal of life. Are you accepting that rather than criticizing the American philosophy that that's the way you ought to live? I'm just wondering if you are accepting our values when there are better values.

ML/MJ: These are very very very high-standard questions, philosophical questions. And these are questions that refer to 3 parts of the world, the American continent, Europe, and what is

called eastern Europe, where we are. There are points, that the Americans dream is to get to the cultural level of Europe, whereas the western Europeans dream of once achieving the American standards. But there are no American standards anymore because America is going downwards as well. Whereas us here, what is referred to as eastern Europe, that is just the name I think, we find ourselves in a situation where we obviously understood to make the same dreams as the western Europeans, to realize the American dream in Europe, which has been found out that is not the case for the western Europeans either. This is why it would be ideal for us to be part of a united Europe, but the western part of Europe is also going down because of the social situation, that is for the people in similar ages as well as the medical care and the immigration policies, the situation in western Europe in these days is obviously questioned by the happenings. Now we find ourselves somewhere where not even the rest of the world which was our idol is fighting for their identification or to put themselves into a situation. We were hoping and dreaming of realizing the American dream. Then it turned out that neither the western Europeans want or can realize the American dream in Europe. So then we wanted or would like to achieve the western European dream or standard whereas western Europe is also having an identical (identity?) crisis and a social crisis and a political crisis as well. Szirac said yesterday that we have an identical crisis. So now we here in eastern Europe, this is a good comparison to say that unfortunately us like a person we are late the train has gone. It means that at least western Europe and the western world had a quick train and it went upwards and during that time we were in the east bloc. Now what was planned, and it was a dream, to achieve a status quo, that doesn't exist anymore, because one side has collapsed. So what can we achieve? What is the goal? We have to see the reality: the east, the east will come and raise and come up to dominate. The American continent as well as the western half of Europe is anxious about the east.

MT: By the east you mean the Orient?

ML/MJ: Yes. China. Whatever, you call it China, you call it the Orient, I think the Orient is better, because there is another question how the connections will develop between China and Japan and the rest of the Orient. Anyhow, the western world is anxious that the Orient will rise. If we think about a worldwide sports event, then we Hungarians are not on the field where the play is going on, if we are in the stadium we do not even have a seat in a position, we are somewhere up where you are permitted to stand and look on and await the result. (laughter)

MT: So maybe you missed the train.....

ML: But it is not our fault. Only that is a fact.

MT: Right, and the train may be having a wreck and you're going to escape the wreck because you missed the train. That is very interesting. I am concerned that you are going to Transylvania tomorrow and you probably have things to do.

ML: Yes, but there were many many good questions.

MT: But I want to ask just one other thing if you can explain and that is, what is the difference if there is a difference between your life now, and that would maybe apply to other people too, as opposed to before '89?

ML/MJ: (discussion of paying the parking ticket)

ML: My life, I am with 10 million Hungarians, our life is more free, good, more free in work, more free to travel, but this is a little superficial, it's absolutely freedom, but for a more human life it is not better. I have had as a young man or a student a life more rich, more

END OF TAPE ONE, SECOND SIDE

MT: You said that life was richer and more human. Explain what that means.

ML/MJ: As the power of domination by politics has been replaced by the power of domination by money, that also gives the feeling of me or us or society, earlier we did suffer, that we couldn't talk freely, we couldn't travel freely, if you broke the rules you found yourself in jail which was not very pleasant. Now these former problems are not existing anymore because these are all granted. But it appears that this is only results on the surface. Now we miss those positive features of humanity like solidarity, friendship, humanity among each other independently or among friends, and it appears at this moment that these features maybe are more endangered in a so-called free society than they were obviously endangered during the dictatorship.

MT: Is there a change in family life? Is family life still a kind of a castle to which you can return and find safety?

ML/MJ: Is the question, is the family in danger?

MT: Is there a difference in family life since the changes? Has this affected family life?

ML/MJ: I don't feel it is a catastrophe, I think it is rather the so-called development of the world all over, the world is changing, because we have a different life obviously than we had 15 years ago.

MT: Is the difference more freedom? To speak, to travel, in the society?

MJ: There's no question. That question has been answered several times. Yes.

MT: That is the fundamental difference? Are there other differences? In society, and that affects family life? In public and private life?

ML/MJ: Life has really changed basically. It definitely does affect private life, family life, social life.

MT: I'm trying to get a concrete example of the difference. There is obviously a difference in freedom of travel.

MJ: Yes, people can travel, people can talk.

MT: How does this affect family life or does it? You could always talk in the family, couldn't you? Talk freely?

ML/MJ: Sure. Yes. We still may have the reflections, that we are walking around, where is the bog? We tune up the radio, the television, when it is louder we talk quietly. We had a period when we were anxious when the bell rang, who is coming? This is the question. A little joke: the bell rings in the middle of the night, Mr. Smith opens the door,

he is trembling, there are policemen, they ask the question “Why are you trembling, Comrade Kovacs? We didn’t come against you, we came for you”. (laughter) It’s very typical.

MT: There’s a classic scene from the movie “Ninotchka”. Did you ever see “Ninotchka” with Greta Garbo?

ML: No.

MT: It’s wonderful. The comrades come from Russia to Paris and they get into trouble, they start drinking and living in a western style, this is during the cold war, and Ninotchka comes to check up on them, and so there’s a scene where Ninotchka and the comrades are talking in the apartment she’s given, and she shares the apartment with other people, and they’re in the middle of this talk about things in Russia as vs.the west and one of the other people who lives in the apartment walks through to go to the bathroom and they shut up, they freeze, they don’t say a word, until the person who has walked through the apartment goes into the bathroom, then they start talking again. It’s a wonderful scene.

MJ: This was an everyday scene in this country. It was not one scene, it was everywhere, every day.

ML: Yes.

MT: I think that in the west this aspect of Communism was enormously publicized, exaggerated, possibly exaggerated.

MJ: Possibly it was not exaggeration, what you thought was exaggeration.

MT: What I’m thinking is that this is the only picture we had of Communism, as if it was totally terror, nothing else.

ML: There were different forms of terror, and different periods also in Hungary. From ’50 to ’60, there was a different period in this country, and between the countries there was also a different level of really terrorism. In Romania also in the ’80’s. In the ’80’s in Hungary it was really goulash Communism, it was not Communism, it was a mélange of systems.

MT: But when I hear you talk about today it bears out, I think, your saying people have short memories, because you don’t talk about the absence of terrorism, you talk about the difficulties now and how you didn’t expect this to be so difficult and now it’s very depressing and very.....

ML/MJ: Yes, and it’s true. Maybe this is why I am talking about successes on the surface because such features of freedom became so quickly obvious, granted to us as well, that we can

travel freely if we have money to find ourselves travel, that we can change money no matter if it is U.S. dollars or Euros or whatever which was a serious jail sentence when we had our currency during Communism, such features of freedom today belong to us, they are granted, they are given, but, if you think, earlier it was very different.

MT: I guess what I'm trying to get-----I'm coming from somewhere, obviously I have a position. I think there were good and bad about Communism, maybe more bad, I have not lived under it. But you say that there is not as much richness, not as much humanness now. There are wonderful things about capitalism and democracy, the freedom, the freedom to travel, to speak and so forth, but there are bad things too. I guess what I'm trying to get is the total picture of both systems and how they compare, that's I guess what I'm trying to do.

ML: So exactly what is your subject?

MT: That's it, the subject is what is life like, what was it like before '89, what is it like now? And I think I get that.

ML: And you have a worker and an intellectual, there are so many different social and

MJ: We did discuss that the other day [MJ refers to a conversation he had with MT] and the answer is that she obviously has more chance to talk to intellectuals than workers just because of our level of friends.

MT: That's fine, those are my contacts. Also I'm limited in time, one can't do, I can't do the whole picture. I can do people who speak English and with whom I have contacts. Now I can do people who speak Hungarian only. But I will investigate that group, that population, I can't investigate everybody.

MJ: She is financing herself so she cannot afford to travel to different villages around the country.

MT: But what I'm interested in is how people feel now about the way it was and the way it is now. One other thing has come up before, that is, Americans of my generation remember of course the crisis of World War II and we very well remember the leadership in which I think we were probably blessed, it was good leadership. And we remember Winston Churchill who talked about blood, sweat and tears, that's what they had to experience, and they had to and he told them they had to. And I asked one person I interviewed, was there no leader for Hungary who said, "It's gonna be tough", because nobody expected the difficulties. And I just wonder about the question of leadership. The answer I got was that Josef Antall did this a little but he only lasted a short time, he died. And my question is, are there not leaders who explain it's going to be tough, this is a political and social and economic situation you have to work at, Americans have to hear this too. Because there seems to be a pessimism in Hungary about the current situation.

MJ: This question, I think, there is not an answer depending on the person you ask, because it is obvious a leader who is hoping to be elected as a leader cannot do anything else than to promise, and nobody would be elected if somebody will.....

ML: Like Churchill.....

MJ:will forecast a hard time.

MT: Churchill did. It depends I think on the person's charisma, the power of leadership, that's part of leadership, to be able to.....

MJ: No, no, no, no, no In a free democratic election in a more or less quiet society, there are 9 participants who would lie and promise a better life, more beer, more wine, more veal, more meat; the other would say more work, more love, more happiness; the 3rd one would say more health care, more money for the old people, more education; and the 10th would say I promise you a hard life but for your grandchildren it will be better. Who is running without hope? No matter what country we speak about, Hungary or the U.S..

MT: What do you think?

ML: The last, of course.

MJ: The answer is, of course.

ML/MJ: Politics is horror. We are forced to, during Communism, we had to express our so-called importation, our own political feelings officially, we had to say that our own political feeling is Communism and we had to sign it, otherwise there was a retaliation. Now we are forced to do the same, I mean it is not false to be a party member, but we are made to be part of the politics because of the media. Earlier, during Communism, we could have more or less our life if we were navigating in the given part, then you could have a life because even the politicians wanted us not to interfere in politics, we just do what we are told to do and then we were not bothered. Today you cannot do that because politics penetrates the most inferior position of jobs, because if there is a change in power then the policy of those governing, they will change not only the ministers, they will change down. The people who will not change are those who are cleaning the toilets, the bathrooms and the floor. At this point we have to mention that the words like succeeding to achieve the American standard in this little unimportant small-time country as well that Hungary is split like the United States into 2 parts, 50-50 per cent, it is an achievement of the media, because it is one half of the country one side, the other half the other side, and unfortunately, unluckily, this penetrates and dominates not only the personal life but the family life, friendships, social life and that brings together or separates people, individuals, families, friends, companies, and this is very bad.

MT: I have heard this before, that people who have had groups of friends, very good friends over a long period of time, now don't speak to each other because they have political differences of opinion, and they can't talk to each other anymore. This is a problem in the United States, not always, but it is now. Then it sounds as if it was better under Communism, that part of life, because you could lead your personal life as long as you toed the line.

ML/MJ: This part of life was better. Absolutely. This was the reason that the majority wouldn't conduct politics. It was known that to go out in the street to demonstrate on the 1st of May, you knew you had to take part, then we were together, either without politics together or against the

leadership together, with the same people who you want to avoid today, when he is coming across the street then you go to the other side. The society or if you like the nation is split.

MT: Then you had either a common friend, if you were a Communist, or you had a common enemy.

ML/MJ: I have never known Communists. I only have seen real Communists on the TV.

(laughter)

MJ: Maybe this dissention, this quarreling, this separation, this split, maybe this is the price of democracy.

ML/MJ: I cannot think this is real, I think this is artificial, and this is because of the media, this is the result of the activity of the media, because I do not think it is natural that all over the world, in the United States, in western Europe, France, Germany, Britain, in Hungary, everywhere the society is split by half, why not 40-60, why not 20-80.....

MT: But sometimes it is 40-60 or 20-80, sometimes.

ML/MJ: Very rarely. Look at Germany. The lady who was finally elected with a slight majority, it was obvious for everybody who looked at the German situation that it was a suicide attempt of the former chancellor to participate in this coming up election because there was such a huge advantage on the lady's side. The result is 50-50. Nobody estimated that. Everywhere the media brings the results up to 49-51 per cent.

MT: You're very hard on the media.

ML/MJ: Yes, yes. We have to realize that during Communism there was a so-called lack of articles in the market, most articles were in shortage, and the result was that the international wholesaler was the most successful in the market, and the same is valid in the media, it was a one-sided media during Communism. So it is obvious that now the so-called commercial media is dominating because everybody wants to get the different features, whether they are different or not. So we were taken by the western part of Europe into the European community because they needed the market for their production, that is obvious. One can observe very easily, whatever your faculty or trade is, you only have to see in the shops specialized in your trade, whatever it is, car or clothing or other articles of consumption, what is the newest production, the newest development that you find in the western world, and what is going out is selling less in the western world, than is brought in in middle Europe, and what is fading out here that is transported farther to eastern Europe and so forth, so the market is just extended.

MT: If you are critical of the media, you are not buying what they are selling, that is to say, you see through the media, you don't think they're portraying the truth. Are you the only one who criticizes the media? Don't other people also? So in a sense they're not completely selling what they say, they're not completely successful in what they're trying to do.

ML/MJ: There is no question that everybody is unhappy and is criticizing the media. But it doesn't matter because there are superior powers and forces behind the media, political and economic. There is no question but nobody is satisfied or happy about the media because even those who are members of the media, they do not agree with what they have to do or what they are doing. And just the word "media", media should be there but shouldn't be pushing itself into everywhere as it is everywhere, so wherever you turn there is media there. But in this country it is even more aggressive, so the same television channel in the Netherlands is more human in the Netherlands than here, it is the same company. In the media, the same business chain that has one's program broadcast in the States or western Europe, then comes to central Europe and then goes to east Europe and so forth, it is the same but the fact is that it is so inhuman that people are fed up with this aggressiveness. You can already notice in certain countries how people are getting fed up with what exists, and if people get fed up with that then that will be my hour and then we can show our art. But I will be too old then.

MT: But that's hope!

ML: Yes. (laughs) When I reach the age of pension!

MT: I wanted to say that the aggressive media can't be more aggressive here than in the United States. And in the United States people are fed up.

ML/MJ: I am sorry for them! (laughter)

MT: You know I'm not here to answer these questions, but I think it is true that being fed up is a sign that they're not going to win ultimately, and that is hope.

ML/MJ: This is the only hope! (laughter)

MT: That's right, but isn't this what we're talking about, what American democracy is about, that the power is in the people, not the king, not the state, but all of the people, it's slow, it's uncertain, it goes up and down, but as Churchill I believe said, it's a terrible system but it's the best we've got at the moment.

ML/MJ: Yes. The individuals, the human individuals, are only important in 2 cases or in 2 periods, when it is necessary to eat up whatever item has to be sold, or when it is time for elections. Then every single person gets suddenly important, and when it is over then nobody is important for anybody. Unfortunately, and this is the democracy in the 21st century.

MT: It's certainly not perfect.

ML/MJ: Democracy is not perfect, okay, but a democracy without funds, without money, that becomes worse, and this is what we have here.

MT: Yes, that's a problem, but with money is a problem too. I had someone tell me that maybe in a thousand years when there was plenty of money maybe Communism would work. I don't know.

ML/MJ: The social part of Communism was and still would be attractive, but the economic part, not mentioning the efficiency of capitalism against or the failures of Communism, but the economic part of Communism was not available. You just have to look at Sweden, where there was a sort of socialism without the Soviets, it didn't work either.

MT: Because they didn't have the economic.....?

ML/MJ: Yes. Because the race, the competition is still more important.

MT: Somebody told me that the ideal of socialism, everybody equal, was a fine ideal but it doesn't work.

ML/MJ: At least so far. (laughs)

MT: As I said I'm not here to solve these problems. Do you want to say anything else about this subject, before and after?

ML/MJ: I think we discussed all. I think it is very good, because when I went to school, no matter if it was elementary or high school, we did discuss these topics when it was all theory, what was better Communism or capitalism or imperialism, but now since we have it we do not discuss it because we fight, and we do not summon all these questions for yourself or with your friends, it is a chance to discuss it with somebody from abroad, especially from overseas.

MT: Well, good.

ML: Thank you.

MT: I was going to thank you very very much for your time and I do appreciate it very much.