

An Interview with Krisztina Nemerkenyi

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**

Although born when Rakosi was the repressive Communist leader of Hungary, Krisztina Nemerkenyi grew up during the Kadar regime and did not experience Communism as repressive. She attributes her sense of freedom not to Kadar but to the influence of her family which was large (8 children), democratic, deeply religious (Roman Catholic), and skeptical of political propaganda. She feels her family taught her to speak and live as she believed without fear, and while she was aware of spying in the university and elsewhere she had no personal experience of it. She taught English and geography and also worked in scientific publishing and as an organizer for scientific meetings. She comments on current political and social situations in Hungary.

- Thomas: This is Major Thomas at Csorsz utca 5 in Budapest, Hungary, on November 14, 2009, and I am interviewing Krisztina Nemerkenyi, and I think, Krisztina, I'll start out by asking you where and when, the month and the date, you were born and a little bit about your background, your family.
- Nemerkenyi: I was born January 23, 1953, here in Budapest, in a very big family, there are altogether 8 children in our family, we are luckily still alive, all of us, but our parents died some years ago because they were already over 80, they lived together for more than 55 years, so it was a very nice period of our lives. That period, in 1953 when I was born, I was told by my parents and my brothers wasn't a very nice period in Hungary for many people, it was called the Rakosi era, that was the Communist leader in Hungary. But to tell you the truth I think I was brought up in a very cozy and warm family because I never felt the difficulties of that life. There were 8 children in our family and my mother didn't work, it was only my father who was working.
- Thomas: What did he do?
- Nemerkenyi: He was a chemical engineer. We lived first in a two-room flat which wasn't a very big one, but then we moved to a four-room flat which was much cozier. But I never felt the nuisance of living together in 2 rooms because there was love between each other and my parents wanted to make a very nice surroundings for us. So I remember, I have good memories: when I was a small child and, of course I know that my parents didn't have enough money, my mother tried to sew dolls at home, and all the children had a different duty in preparing these dolls. Some of them sewed the head, the other one put clothes on the baby, I mean on the doll, then some of them put a pair of shoes prepared by my mother.
- Thomas: So she sewed clothes for dolls, not dress-making for adults
- Nemerkenyi: No, only for the dolls. During this time she was always telling stories, and I liked it very much. So it wasn't a nuisance for me, I have only good memories from that time. Although now, thinking back to that time, I feel that we didn't have a very comfortable surrounding, but I thought it normal what we had so I didn't miss anything because I had sisters and brothers and if some of my sisters became taller the dress was given to the other sister, so it was a quite natural thing. The only thing I didn't like when I became, let's say, 10 or 12 years old, I didn't like the red skirt dotted with white dots because I saw already for a long time on my sisters; at the age of 12 it was already----I wanted to become a woman! But I liked it very much.
- Thomas: You really had a very warm loving atmosphere. Were your parents Communists?

Nemerkenyi: No, no, never. To tell you the truth, we have always followed the Christian religion, even during the Communist era when many people said that it was forbidden to go to the church, I never felt it, we always went to the church.

Thomas: Were you Roman Catholics?

Nemerkenyi: Yes, we are Roman Catholics.

Thomas: And there was no frowning by the authorities on your going to church, you never suffered for going to church?

Nemerkenyi: No, no, and I realize it soon, that in that school we attended there were 2 or 3 similar families as our family. And, for example, at that time there was a Pioneer movement for the children, and my parents, I don't know whether we talked about it or not but we didn't want to join, this Pioneer movement, everybody joined it, and when members of my family said no, we don't want to join, then the 2 other families' children joined us, so there were always 3 families, because most of the time we had similar classes, I mean my sisters were the similar age of the girl of that family. So I didn't hear the protest, it was quite natural for me that I don't want to be a member of that Pioneer movement, and my parents didn't tell too many things against it, but I accepted this because we were talking about it in a natural way and then we said that maybe it doesn't match our family's lifestyle, so we don't want to be and I didn't feel any problem in connection with that.

Thomas: You didn't feel any problem in the school. Was this a Roman Catholic school?

Nemerkenyi: No, no, it was a state school, an elementary school. Maybe some of the teachers understood, and that's why they didn't press us. You know, it was a music school which was founded at around that time. The name was Pataaky Istvan [spells the name]. One of my sisters and me attended these music classes, we had to study playing piano or playing the flute or playing violin, you know the Kodaly system, the Kodaly method was introduced there. At that time I didn't feel but now I can see that maybe some of the teachers had a sympathy for this kind of attitude.

Thomas: You weren't of course the only family who didn't join.

Nemerkenyi: Yes, and two other families, because we didn't do that, they also joined us.

Thomas: So you didn't feel discriminated against or pressured by the authorities.

Nemerkenyi: And then my parents never talked about it, that they had, they said that at the beginning of the '50's, when I wasn't yet born, some people told them that aren't you afraid that you have 8 children and you might be punished for some reason, but the parents and the whole family followed that pattern I never felt there was a problem with it.

Thomas: You didn't feel yourself left out of the Pioneer activities? I've understood that a lot of the Pioneer activities weren't exactly party activities, they were kids' activities, that in the summer they went to camp or they went out in the woods and played cowboys and Indians. You didn't miss that?

Nemerkenyi: No, because going to school and going home I always went together with my school mates. Maybe once every second week or once a month they had a meeting, but I had a lot of sisters and brothers at home so I always went home and I had something to do there, yes, there were people to play with. I never felt it, and we didn't have to go because after a time my parents tried to make it a very memorable childhood, that during the summer period---- I don't know how they met a school master who was already retired---- and they had a bigger house at Lake Balaton, and we always went there and rented one room, I don't know whether we rented or.... You know, there is always a few weeks apart between people and I also feel nowadays if there are more children in the family and I see there might be financial problems and I try to help them, not directly, because some people don't accept it very well, but in a very tricky way so that they cannot be hurt but they still have a better condition because now I feel that maybe my parents also had some problems when we were small children.

Thomas: I have heard people I've interviewed say that in the Communist era there was a greater feeling of social responsibility toward others, more of a community feeling, than now. Do you think that's true?

Nemerkenyi: Yes. For a long time I had the same feeling. But there was a big change. When my children were born, it's difficult to explain it, I know that the people were closer to each other at that time, during the Communist era, that's for sure. But nowadays there is a new tendency that very many young girls, mostly girls, have the feeling that they have to do some social work, and earlier, officially, we couldn't do that. But now officially you can do it. Either you go to the local government where they can employ you to do some social work, let's say as a part-time job or a full-time job and you do it, but many people do it on their own, I mean they don't want money for that but they go for example into hospitals working without payment.....

Thomas: Volunteers.

Nemerkenyi: Volunteers, yes, as I myself maybe because my daughter is a little bit similar type, but when I was at home with my children in Hungary we had the chance to stay at home and we were paid a little bit of money under the age of 3, and two of my children were born after each other so I remained at home more than 6 years. I live in such a house as we are in now, [an apartment] house, and there are a lot of elderly people in these houses living alone, and I always, I found they need someone to contact with, to touch, to talk to them or they weren't able to go down to do their shopping, so I helped them. I took the hands of my kids and as I did my shopping for myself I did it for them as well,

and in the afternoons or in the evenings, if I had a quarter of an hour, then I rang the bell and went into their homes and we talked a bit about everyday life. And maybe that also added to my daughter's such an activity, she was working in hospital with elder people and with children as well when they are in the hospital, just to make it more comfortable for them, so it's a kind of social work. And there was a period when I was a university student that I didn't have such a feeling among my student mates, and I was so happy and surprised that among the young girls, already after the change of regime, there are a lot of young people who are interested in such a work.

Thomas: You said that under the Communists you were not allowed to do this kind of social work officially. Was that because the state did it?

Nemerkenyi: I don't know, because I was much younger, I was a child. You know, when you have no relatives at this age and when you are living in a big family where we help each other, I couldn't imagine such a situation. But I think that they wanted to pretend that they do everything for these people. The same situation is that, you know, nowadays you can find a lot of beggars going around the city, and I'm sure at that time there were, but they weren't allowed to go to the streets or they were shifted to the suburban region. And there were no disabled people. It was a surprise for me, when I was teaching at the university, we had contact with other universities and from the middle lands groups of students regularly came to Hungary, they were interested in urban development. And to my greatest surprise, in each of the groups there was minimum one person who had some problems, either with his leg or with his arm. And I was shocked: what could happen to that country that there are so many people who are disabled? And then I realized that in Hungary they were hidden. And, for example, you could read in the newspaper that they built a special quarter for disabled people who can only use wheelchairs---- out of the city. But they didn't make it easier for them to travel within the city and to live among everyday people. So they were a little bit closed. And it changed only during the last 10 or 15 years.

Thomas: So they did that for what purpose? In order to make the society look better?

Nemerkenyi: Maybe. And there are no problems.

Thomas: Yes, the perfect society. So you went to elementary and secondary schools here in Budapest?

Nemerkenyi: Yes. But in the secondary school it was already in a different district, a little bit further. I went to Fazekas Mihaly secondary school, which was and still is one of the best secondary schools. [spells name of school] It was a specialized school for languages, for English, and it was unique, there were only two such schools in Budapest. Because in all other schools you could study only Russian. Maximum two of these classes existed here in Budapest [during the Kadar regime]. I was able to go there because one of my sisters was a

gymnast, and she was a member of the Hungarian National Selective Team, and it was a school which specialized also in sports. She was the first because she was a champion gymnast, and then as a traditional line all the girls could go and attend that school, so all the 5 girls attended that school. Only 2 of us could attend the English language specialization because before that my 3<sup>rd</sup> sister could attend only the Russian because at that time there was only Russian specialization. So I started my secondary school in 1967 and my sister in 1965 and that was the first English class. And the specialization meant that we had English language classes every day. Instead of these so-called practical technical lessons we had also English classes but with a different specialization, we were trained to become tourist guides in English for the tourists visiting Hungary.

- Thomas: It was an old school? But it continued to exist during the Kadar regime possibly because it trained tourist guides in languages.
- Nemerkenyi: Yes, yes. So we studied the normal everyday language and we had two extra lessons which was for tourist guides. Maybe you have heard about the Hungarian state tourist organization Ibus? Members of these big organizations came and taught us there, both Hungarian average knowledge and later on in English about the tourist sights of Budapest and Hungary as well.
- Thomas: So in the course of learning to be a tourist guide you probably learned Hungarian history and Budapest history as well. What other history did you have, probably not in elementary school, but in secondary school?
- Nemerkenyi: Of course in Hungary we always started everything with the Greek and Roman times. And then we regularly arrived at Hungarian history, sometimes we had some medieval Hungarian history. But already in the secondary school we had a historian who had a wider overview of the immediate past. Although I don't know whether he was afraid of talking about such things, because this was a centrist school---in Hungary, all the schools could accept those students who were living in the surroundings but these were the exceptional schools, half of the students came from the district where the school was located and half of them could come from all different parts, not only from Budapest but from a suburban city as well. And there were some students who were a little bit politically more interested in certain things, and they could put good questions to the teacher, and they tried to formulate their words, their sentences in a way that they could answer the question and they still remained politically correct.
- Thomas: So the history was taught from the Communist point of view, the Marxist-Leninist point of view. But were you also taught that other people saw it a different way?
- Nemerkenyi: Not very much, not very much, so there was no positive or negative discussion at all. What I had in another way or viewpoint was from my family.

You know, first of all I am the youngest in the family, so I have 7 brothers and sisters with 13 years' difference, and they partly had lived through the political situation already at an earlier age so they had memories. During the very very bad Communist era, from '49 to '56, they had lived and I was a small child, I could only hear it from my brothers, and from my father who took them to the statue, where Stalin's statue was taken apart in 1956, so two or three of my brothers were there, so they could see it with their own eyes, so they could tell about it. So it wasn't from my reading or from stories but it was reality, what they could tell about it.

Thomas: Did you find that children from other families also had this exposure to different points of view, to a certain extent?

Nemerkenyi: Some.

Thomas: Some. You could talk to some kids, maybe to some of their parents, but not all?

Nemerkenyi: Yes, some of them could, and it was interesting, my parents had a better relation to those parents with whom they could talk about in a different way, not the official state way, but in a private way.

Thomas: I've had people tell me that you knew, your parents knew and you learned from your parents, to whom you could talk and to whom you could not talk.

Nemerkenyi: Yes. My parents never told me but you had a feeling. And maybe a hidden sense developed in certain people, in me yes, because at once I could realize in 3 sentences or from the reaction whether you can continue or talk a different way.

Thomas: So what happened to you after secondary school, after the gymnasium? Did you go into tourism?

Nemerkenyi: No. I practiced it during the summer holidays, already during the secondary school and after that when I was a university student, during the summers I worked, because it was money for me and it was interesting for me. You know, I decided to study further on in English, the English language and geography, because I was interested in these two subjects. And I wanted to get to know a lot of people. That's why during the summer period I worked as a tourist guide.

Thomas: Did you have many tourists coming during this period?

Nemerkenyi: Yes, yes, American tourists. The American group was very interesting for me because I realized that they said that, when you received the list of the tourists at the hotel or at the tourist office, I always liked to read the names. Because I'm dealing a little bit with languages and I liked to check the origin of the

names, Slavic origin or German, and then I saw a very funny, very interesting name, a name called Kossuth, and then he said that there might be some descendants of Louis Kossuth in his family. That group was a business group, they were coming to Hungary for the first time to check whether they can make contact. They were Americans from different parts of America, from the south, from the north, it was already in '68 or '69, there was a new mechanism of industry, when we wanted to open to other parts of the world although we remained Communist but we had a different mechanism in industry so maybe they were interested in such a situation, whether they could make business with Hungarians.

- Thomas: That's interesting. Did you have any difficulty getting into the university, because you came, I would take it from what was considered a middle class family, did you have any trouble getting into the university?
- Nemerkenyi: Not me. One of my brothers, who is a doctor. During primary and secondary school, not because he was, how do you say, the teacher's pet but he lied what he studied and he wanted to become a doctor, that's why in secondary school he studied a lot, and because he knew he could only be accepted at the university----you know, that is a different system in Hungary, he had to take an entrance examination, and only the best ones can enter the university----and he was excellent in all subjects but he wasn't accepted to the university.
- Thomas: Was that because he was not the child of a worker or a Communist?
- Nemerkenyi: It might be, because he got to know girls from the workers' class who were not excellent who were accepted. So he had to work a year and then the next year he tried again and then he was accepted.
- Thomas: And how did that happen that he was accepted after a year?
- Nemerkenyi: They couldn't reject him because he was so good. I had no chance to have this situation because during the secondary studies they always organized competitions in certain subjects in the country and I participated in the geography competition and the third ten students ranking could get into the university without any entrance exams from that subject, and I only had to do some entrance exams in the other subjects. But as one of my cards was already accepted I hoped that I could study at the university and I could.
- Thomas: So you went to the university here in Budapest. And what did you study?
- Nemerkenyi: Geography and English.
- Thomas: I suppose that was after Count Pal Teleki's death, wasn't it?
- Nemerkenyi: It was in 1941 when Pal Teleki died, and he founded the Hungarian Geographical Society. So I started my university studies in 1971, and it was a

5-year course to a master's, which I received, and then they offered me the chance to stay at the university as a, as a---it is very difficult because in Hungary we followed the Russian names they use at the university, so it was as assistant lecturer. Maybe the British use a different thing but we have the lowest level as assistant lecturer, so I was at the lowest rank. So I was able to have practice lessons, I conducted practice lessons, and sometimes I had lectures as well. [Thomas:discussion of teaching assistants in the United States] I taught there only for 3 years because I studied together with my husband who was also a geographer, and they wanted to invite him to another geography department at that university and they told us that we had to decide who would like to go because, I think it's quite acceptable, they didn't want husbands and wives to work together, and I accepted it, and then I said I want to have children, I was before having a family, so okay, of course I want to have children, and if I'm still interested in the scientific life I can do it a bit later, so I left the university.

Thomas: When were you married?

Nemerkenyi: At the end of the university in 1976. I taught for three years and then I went to work for the directors of another university.

Thomas: What did you do there?

Nemerkenyi: I was dealing with scientific things, publishing, it was an administrative work, a director associate, I was dealing with organizing scientific conferences and publishing scientific books at the university. Editing, reading, yes, and a little bit working on the background to find the press and to make the conversation via letters to find the right person and writing letters to Hungary and abroad in scientific affairs. If I want to translate it I don't know whether there is an English word, organizing scientific affairs is the translation of my position.

Thomas: Did you like that?

Nemerkenyi: Yes, because I always like to work with interesting people, and they were all interesting people, I always like to exchange ideas and that was a good surrounding.

Thomas: Was there any political oversight?

Nemerkenyi: No, we didn't talk too much about it.

Thomas: But I mean, you might not have talked about it, but was there a kind of censorship as to what you could publish or what you could discuss?

Nemerkenyi: No, it wasn't on my department, I don't think there was. I think in Hungary it always depended on the person whether something was tender or was allowed, the person in charge of something. So if there were any, it always depended

on the person, he wanted to be a very good Communist, he wanted to serve very much the Communists, and that's why he did such things. In other schools or in other universities or in other work places, if they allowed it a bit and no one recognized it, then it could go very well, it all depended on the person.

Thomas: Whether the person was more interested in politics or was more interested in science.....

Nemerkenyi: Or was more open to new ideas, yes. Some people say no, it's not true, but that was my experience. Maybe I was working at good places from this point of view.

Thomas: The period we're talking about now is the '80's. Do you think it was more open? Was there more openness to new ideas in the '80's than, say, in the '60's?

Nemerkenyi: Yes, I think yes there was. I can give an example that it always depended on a person. I don't say names. When I was asked to work at the university, my future boss invited me and two other persons, he would like to choose the person to teach in his department from the three of us. And then he talked one by one to each of us. And then he said that he knows I regularly go to church, but anyhow maybe he'd like to pick me to work at the department.. When I was still going out with my future husband, before an exam we happened to go into a church for a pray, and then next month during the lecture, it was a practical lesson so there were only 20 students in the room, that teacher said that the priest of that church is greeting us, going to class, and we were the only people who could understand what this was about, so someone was telling him that we were at the church, and they didn't like it at that time, but we didn't mind, it didn't deter us from going to church, and I was 22 when I first met such a situation. Not in my childhood, not in secondary school, I think it depended on the person. At that time I think it was already an exceptional thing. Some of my students said that they wanted to press her to enter the Communist party, this Communist party little cells, they had to show that newcomers are coming into the Communist party, and they picked out some people, and then they wanted to press her to join the Communist party, and then she said she didn't want to, and then they asked her, do you want to have a degree from this university? And then she joined. In my opinion, I'm not sure I'm right, those people who show themselves to be very strict in their ideas they were never pressed, because they knew they couldn't be pressed, but those who seemed to be a little bit weaker, they were afraid of them, they were easier pressed, they were easier motivated to modify their ideas.

Thomas: But that didn't happen to you, that's not your personal experience, nobody pressed you.

- Nemerkenyi: It's interesting, going back to when I was a tourist guide, they said that all tourist guides had to give a description of the mood they had about Hungary, what did they tell about Hungary between each other. I never had such an experience. But they said that at the university there were some student fellows who had to report about others. We had some suspicion about another student, that he might be the person, but I wasn't so much interested in that. My parents taught me in a democratic way that if I tell my opinion, not in a harsh way but in a decent way, you can always tell your opinion, don't be shy to tell your opinion.
- Thomas: And you did not feel that you had to watch what you did, watch about going to church, watch about whatever the Communist group didn't approve of, you didn't have to sneak around, not do certain things because somebody might see you. Did you have any of that feeling?
- Nemerkenyi: Not with going to church. It was quite natural for me from my childhood.
- Thomas: With anything else?
- Nemerkenyi: Sometimes you had to moderate yourself, what you wanted to tell, or what you wanted to do. But I tried to avoid such situations, I like a clear situation, so I tried to forward what I wanted to tell in a way that everyone would know what is my attitude.
- Thomas: So as a tourist guide describing life in Hungary or things in Hungary, you didn't feel very constrained as to what you could say, very limited in what you could say?
- Nemerkenyi: Yes, and now it comes to my mind that sometimes a partner to his guide looked so surprised what I was talking about, that he might expect a different thing, because he regularly came to Hungary, brought books to Hungary, he was working in Germany, and he was always surprised when I was freely talking about certain things.
- Thomas: Because you said things differently from what the other tourist guides said that he'd heard before.
- Nemerkenyi: Yes. Maybe I was lucky that I had no problems.
- Thomas: But you never had any warnings from anybody, nobody ever told you that somebody had told a Communist cell about you.
- Nemerkenyi: I think maybe it comes from my family, so I felt very in sympathy, very secure, safe in my family surroundings and I could carry with myself.
- Thomas: But I suppose that you also knew that some people did not, that some people didn't feel safe and they would have to tack to the wind, so to speak.

- Nemerkenyi: They were afraid of going to church, a lot, a lot of my friends and colleagues, and then they were afraid of listening to Radio Free Europe, which was practiced by almost all families but everyone kept it as a secret, sometimes we were discussing certain topics that we'd heard on Radio Free Europe.
- Thomas: But did you have to do that in secret so that you kept the volume down and you hid the radio?
- Nemerkenyi: Not in our family. So I learned it, I got used to it from my parents. Maybe they trusted God that they won't have any problem.
- Thomas: But they had lived through the Rakosi era, the worst era.
- Nemerkenyi: Maybe one thing, yes. One of my brothers wanted to become a priest. And my parents, they didn't deter him from his idea, but first, because at that time the priests were persecuted, some of them were in prison, they told him to learn something to have job qualifications different from a priest and then if you still want to become a priest. But have something from which you can live if you can't become a priest, become an engineer. And then after time he started to become interested in different things and he didn't become a priest, but that was his choice, not because of the Communist era. I think he said that it was even more important to become a priest in such an era, but by the time he finished his university studies the era became much lighter, that's why he decided not to become a priest, it was easier for everybody.
- Thomas: I interviewed one person whose family was discouraged by a school principal from sending him to a Catholic gymnasium because if you send your son there, the principal said, you're educating him to be nothing, a street cleaner, a dishwasher, because he'll never get to go on to a college or university.
- Nemerkenyi: They had to fight a lot, I know, but they were the best that came from these schools, because the teachers had to deal with teaching, they were very much concentrating on teaching. What came to my mind and maybe it's important to tell, it might be why I am talking about speaking so freely, because I was the youngest in the family, maybe my brothers and sisters had worse feeling, by the time I grew up maybe it was an easier time. I started my primary school in '59, which wasn't a very good period after '56, but maybe it got a little better in the '60's. But I can only tell about my feelings.
- Thomas: You never really heard from your brothers and sisters about how they felt. [summary of family and youth of KN] You were extremely fortunate. Then did you have any sense that '89 and '90 were coming, were going to happen, that Communism was going to collapse?
- Nemerkenyi: No. I think it got freer. What changes I saw were that people could do certain things, talk about different things, go to church. Normally the Communists said there is no god, there is no religion, they were atheists, but then it became

easier. As I told you, I feel I came from a democratic family, and I didn't find any big difference, but I felt it in my colleagues, they started to talk in a different way, and it was a big surprise to me, because I never thought my background was so different. But there were big changes before '89, they started to talk about different things. I thought it would collapse but after certain years, because if you want a big change you have to bring new people into such positions which are basic to big changes, and I couldn't find big changes. For me it's a surprise that members of the Communist party under a different name....

#### INTERRUPTION

Thomas: When the changes happened, when the system collapsed in '89 and '90, you thought that there was really going to be a big change but you have discovered there has not been?

Nemerkenyi: Yes. You know, for a long time I felt that the Communists always thought that is true what they are telling you. They didn't take into consideration the opinion of other people, before the changes. People who were members of the Communist party, altogether about 800,000, they thought they still are the only persons who can tell the truth, what is the reality. Those who didn't join the new party but they thought they were the only ones who knew what is good, what is right. When we were talking at work about political problems as well as other things you discuss among people, they continued that their opinion is the only opinion, the only right opinion, So they continued the same behavior as when they were members of the Communist party. They had a system in the work places, so they knew about each other who were Communists, and in all units they had to have a person who reports about the mood of the people and they always contacted, they became friends, before that they were maybe only working together, but from the time of the changes they would talk to each other only. So maybe it was a hidden, they guarded each other, it turned out they were the people who talked about the mood of the work places, they tried to guard each other against attacks, they protected each other. Even nowadays you can see, after 20 years, sometimes you have the feeling they are still discussing about us, what the friends think what they are accustomed to and they still maybe follow that pattern, they always ruled that party which was the ruling party and now the descendant party has the same basic ideas under different names. And in Hungary now there are two different ways, we are completely separated into two different camps. I feel that they are still discussing these things.

Thomas: And they don't discuss the two sides with each other and compromise and work together?

Nemerkenyi: No, but we always try, to discuss the problems with them, not in a harsh aggressive way but in a normal everyday way, because I got accustomed to this way in our family, to learn the culture of compromise and working

together. But I had some colleagues who in a very aggressive way attacked them by their voice, what you did was so bad and you are still doing these things, and it didn't have to calm down the opposition, sometimes it made it more severe. It's very interesting, that person talked in a different way to me, because I accept a lot of ideas and talk in a normal every day way, so they are defending themselves til now, after 20 years.

Thomas: Are you still working and in administration?

Nemerkenyi: Yes, I am teaching as well. At the university.

Thomas: And how does this polarization work out in the university? You are teaching the students, and in an administrative position you must have to work with other people. How does this conflict between the two sides---- give me an example of what this does to the way you work, the way the work progresses in the university.

Nemerkenyi: It's my opinion that work places are not the place for political debate. If you have to work together with other people you have to accept different ideas. If you can't, then don't talk about political situations in Hungary, I think we're talking now about Hungary. Of course you know, you have the feeling with whom you can do it, and then you discuss certain programs with them, but officially when we are together in a meeting I try to avoid talking about things.

Thomas: But does it cause argumentation, conflict, in, say, a faculty meeting?

Nemerkenyi: Not exactly. There are sometimes, it depends on the person. There are some colleagues who always say, no, I don't want to work with that person, he's leftist, he's rightist, and such things. But I always say it's not a good idea because he might be a good professional.

Thomas: But can you get a faculty to work together, to make decisions?

Nemerkenyi: Yes, yes.

Thomas: So you can work together even if there is friction, some bad feelings, you can still get things done.

Nemerkenyi: Yes. If I feel different from my partner, I say to him, there might be some situations in which we don't agree, but now let's talk about the work. In the work I always like to be fair so let's talk about the work. Some of my colleagues know what my political views are but we can still work together. Although sometimes now I have the feeling that when in the leadership of the university there are changes and they know what my political, not only political, I never act out politically but everyone knows, I think you should be able, every one should know your political ideas, be honest and open. The

other person still tries to hide their political attitude, that's not my type. They know and I don't mind, but I'm loyal to the university, I'm loyal to the ideas what the university would like to do, and until I get into a serious conflict with the way the university is directed, it cannot be directed politically but sometimes politics gets into it, until that time I work there. If I find I cannot work there because of some situation, then I say, okay, I leave the university.

- Thomas: But are there situations where conflict does arise and get people get at loggerheads and nothing can get done, does that happen?
- Nemerkenyi: There might be but they try to explain it as personal difference not a political difference.
- Thomas: I have understood that in the Parliament it's difficult to get things done because people are political and they don't hide their politics and they can't talk and they can't compromise.
- Nemerkenyi: Yes, it has been a problem, and I think, it's very difficult to talk about it because someone should know very well the situation in Hungary. I think a great part of the problems arise because the Communists still are the same people in the Parliament, there are some who work as Communists there, as members of Parliament under different parties.
- Thomas: Yes I have heard that the top echelons of the Communist party at the time of the change managed to perhaps purchase some of the companies that were state-controlled but were privatized, they managed because of inside information to purchase them and then sell them and then became wealthy, and they are the same people, not as Communists but as something else.
- Nemerkenyi: Now capitalists. Until this time they said that everything belongs to the state and now they are all the time attacking the people if they don't want to sell what belongs to the Hungarian state, to the whole people, it's Hungarian and you can't sell it because it belongs to our people.
- Thomas: I've heard this over and over again, that the leadership hasn't really changed, those who were high echelon Communists are now moneyed people in this country.
- Nemerkenyi: Their personality didn't change, but they are fighting now for a capitalist way of thinking although they were Communists, and I don't like those people who change all the time depending on the way the wind blows. That's one thing. The other is that this creates an opposition in Hungary that we wanted to get without the Communists because of the change of regime, but they are still sitting in the Parliament. That's the basic thing, that's why there are two sides in Hungary, the truth is they are still there under a different name. How can they talk about us, in my age group, we know everything that happened, so they can't tell lies about what happened then. And they would very much

like to rely on the newspapers, the news media, that has been in their hands. Only in the last few years there are such new media which can tell things a different way. That's why all the newspapers, all the TV broadcasting, all the radio, they told what they wanted to be the truth.

Thomas: So it wasn't really free, there weren't lots of different opinions, it was controlled by the power elites.

Nemerkenyi: And they bought very fast, one did, the newspapers and such media and it became the private personal belonging of a former Communist. But in the last few years other television channels appeared, new newspapers have been published, which they say they are rightist, but of course at the beginning they had to have an opposition. Now I think they are moving to the center. Of course they give floor to the right and left opinions both, maybe they can be said to be a little more rightist, but that's how they can be seen as getting to the center. But that was a natural counteract of being everything in the leftist hands.. And then they have to find a center way.

Thomas: Are these new newspapers and radio stations Hungarian-owned?

Nemerkenyi: Some of them are Hungarian-owned, and I hope it will remain in the hands of the Hungarians because then they will have control. As a personal remark, I don't like all the kinds of advertising I see and I hate it in magazines, journals, there is such advertising that doesn't fit in that magazine or journal. A good example is the National Geographic Magazine, being a geographer, for me maximum ad, a rucksack, a pair of boots with which you can go hiking, something like that, or photo cameras or digital cameras, something like that, not luxurious cars which can be used only in cities, or furniture, it doesn't match the feeling a person who wants to read the National Geographic about geography. In other newspapers you see the same thing, and I don't like it, and when I see it I always protest it, I write, because I think it's important also to be heard.

Thomas: Yes, of course. There has been access however since the changes, in 1989-90, to foreign newspapers? There was always access to the radio with Radio Free Europe.

Nemerkenyi: I think there was access earlier. You had to go to the hotel to buy it because at the hotel the foreign tourists wanted to buy it, so to which place to go, I know the Hotel Gellert because some of my brothers and sisters regularly read Newsweek, and later on I went to buy it and some shops, but only very few places. I think if I remember correctly there was a chance for students to buy at a very low price, to subscribe, so I had a lot of Newsweeks, and it was very good for improving my English and understanding, and I read a lot about what's happening in the world. Unfortunately it gradually became much more American. During the '60's and '70's it was in my opinion much more euro-centered and then gradually it became more American-centered, which is

good, but America is only one part of the world, if you wanted to get more information about the rest of the European continent you had to read more about that continent. So sometimes I went to the newspapers, American, or later on The Guardian, and the Herald Tribune, The Times, not always but sometimes I bought it or if there was an important piece of news. Of course at the very beginning when one of your friends or relatives went abroad I always asked them to bring the newspaper, either from the airplane or I would also ask them to bring me books as well. When I was student and studying English at the university just opposite the university there was a bookstore there and after a time the university students could buy English and American books. It was a foreign book shop with all kinds of foreign books. It was good to go to the second hand book shops because the relatives always brought books to the family which they sold and you could get a lot there. You had to know where to go, and if you had good friends there they always put aside and they didn't put it on the shelves and if you were interested in a certain thing they would put it aside and when you went show it to you.

Thomas: I don't know whether you can answer this or not, but you were an educated person and in the university with contacts there, but would you say that before '89 and '90 the average person in Hungary had access to information about the rest of the world, did they know to go to certain hotels and shops?

Nemerkenyi: No, no. That was also limited because before the change of regime, let's say before the '70's when in more and more schools English became a specialized language for many children and since that time they might be able to read, but before that time only a limited number of people could speak English, so English wasn't so well-known that people would buy American and English books. German was a bit different, because more and more children chose German, as you know in central Europe German is still, although English language now is ruling the whole world it's still a main means of communication because all the people in the surrounding area speak German because of the Habsburg area. And you know, which was also a good thing, they wanted to forward the different news to Hungarians, but it was also to a limited number of people, those who spoke the language, the Germans had the so-called scala, that's a way of advertising their own country and forwarding the politics of their country, which was printed in German but then they started to translate it into Hungarian, and into English as well, and it was free of charge, so you had to subscribe it only free of charge, and they sent it either from the embassy or from Germany directly, so I always asked for the Hungarian and English versions as well so I could read the English one as well. And my husband who studied German he read the German version. And they still have these but in a very limited number, but I always ask it for my students to read in German to practice their German as well. And in Hungary we had the so-called Daily News which was an English and German newspaper but it was made by the Hungarians. But the news was put by the Hungarians into this newspaper but you could hear a little different in formulating the news but only a limited number of people could read it so

there was no danger that a little modification of a sentence might cause problems. So that was the beginning. So then gradually, I can say since my secondary school I could read English papers and American papers. Of course a greater variety is available now.

Thomas: But the ordinary person, the ordinary worker, wouldn't have access to this because they simply didn't know the languages. The German, English and American newspapers weren't published in translation, that is, translated into Hungarian.

Nemerkenyi: But during the '80's there were big changes, in the television, in the radio.

Thomas: But wasn't Radio Free Europe always available, to anyone who wanted to listen, so you could get a different viewpoint. The radio was a more open channel.

Nemerkenyi: Yes, the BBC, Voice of America, yes, so if someone found it you could listen, in the '80's they didn't disturb the broadcasting, but it was mostly Radio Free Europe because they didn't expect too many people to understand it. But in the '80's in the Hungarian TV and radio there were some political programs which started to ease the mood, they started to talk about some topics which were a little bit closed up to that time, and they even invited some foreign politicians or such journalists who had a great overview of the situation and directly in front of the screen, not on film, they were interviewed and you could hear the original text so they couldn't make a different translation. So that was already an opening for us, you could really hear that they translated the same that he was saying.

Thomas: I wanted to ask you if you feel that since the changes you have received in the press, TV, radio, a lot of propaganda about capitalism, a lot of promotion, what we call a hard sell, a kind of pushing, especially of American ideas, methods, ways. I know there's been a lot more about Coca Cola but what about other more fundamental things, a lot of pro-American, pro-western, capitalist, free-market, globalization kind of things.

Nemerkenyi: In the '60's and at the beginning of the '70's there were, but I always laughed at that, many people laughed at that. Not everybody believed it.

Thomas: You think there were a number of people critical of that, who analyzed it.

Nemerkenyi: Yes, yes. I like to read those newspapers who give the opinions of different, everyday people, and there you can have a different viewpoint. I never liked the newspapers who give the opinion of the newspaper, the editorial page, I never read it or I always laughed at it because they said such stupid things. There were some newspapers which had a different way of thinking and my parents started to buy that newspaper. To tell you the truth, I'm interested in politics, since the age I can read, I've read the newspapers since the age of 6

or 7, and I have learned to read between the lines, my parents also told me certain things when I didn't understand, and then they explained certain things, and I learned to read between the lines and even nowadays, of course I like to read foreign papers and draw my own conclusions, I don't like ready-prepared opinion given to me, I like to create my own opinion. I don't have too much time to watch television, but in the evening I spend minimum one hour listening to the news of different channels, and they tell everything in a different way. But I don't like the boulevard television----we call those televisions which are only for films and for such things, no political debates, like those newspapers that just tell how the politicians live and actors and actresses, I'm not interested in such things, we call that boulevard [spells "boulevard"], for those people who are not interested in politics or education or art but are interested in how they live together, how he undressed in Playboy and such things.

Thomas: What we call gossip, sensational stories, crime and divorce. There's an awful lot of that in the States, too. What about the internet?

Nemerkenyi: To tell you the truth, as I regularly read the newspaper and watch television for the news, I am accustomed, since I was 14 and started to go to the second district grammar school, we always had the Kossuth radio program, the number 1 channel for the radio, they had a very good program since 5:00 or 6:00 in the morning up to 8:00 where they always talked about the traffic situation and what is the name date today and what are we celebrating today, interesting political discussion what the politicians say, and also the time, I always watched when I had to go and I always listened to it, so I always listened to the news since that time. I want to be ready, because being a teacher, and teaching at the university, of course nowadays the students don't listen to the news, don't watch television, I want to be ready if anybody should ask me a question, because I think teaching at the university you should be ready

Thomas: Absolutely. I've heard other people mention that program. What about you and also the students on the internet with things like Facebook and My Space and these chat rooms.

Nemerkenyi: The European is easy. Have you ever heard of it---IWIW--- [she pronounces it]. The student s use it so they make friends this way and tell about themselves, they tell about political situations, they call it a wall, "I put it on the wall and everybody can read it", they create a network with their friends, with their relatives, and then anyone can join and can read them, so it's a space like Facebook.

Thomas: In the United States it has had some influence politically because people don't just gossip, they actually discuss current events and policies. Has that happened here too?

- Nemerkenyi: Yes, sometimes. [she pronounces it again] I heard it only from my students. I've seen it. I use the computer and internet mainly for finding materials for teaching, but I use the email and I subscribe to some places to receive messages and information to watch if there's something interesting on the internet. So for example some of the television channels also have internet, and I subscribe to some of them and they send a message and if I have no time to watch television then I read it on the internet. So they have the latest news and you can watch even the programs as well, but I like to listen to music. Sometimes there are so-called civilian networks on which we send very interesting messages to each other, just to read, and sometimes we forwarded it to others and we sometimes discuss it, we friends create such a network. My students put me on the IWIW and sometimes I read it but not so often, I have no time for that.
- Thomas: Do you think that this could or does create more interest among the students in politics?
- Nemerkenyi: Maybe, maybe. My son says, who is still a student and who lives alone renting a room but hasn't enough money so he regularly comes home and reads the paper with me, but during the week he inhabits the internet, and he says that during the evening he regularly likes to give his opinion and then they start discussing.
- Thomas: Yes. And you also have lots of misinformation, that is, false information, exchanged, but you have some good.
- Nemerkenyi: That's why I don't like it, so if I want to get direct and clear information I always check it in the newspaper or journal or TV. And the other thing is with my students I don't like to talk about politics during the lessons, because of the situation here in Hungary. I don't want to hurt someone with a different opinion. Sometimes they ask me and then I explain. And I always warn them before the voting, please go and vote. I don't say for whom, of course, but try to practice it, because we still have to learn democracy here. It's not a way to say okay, I don't want to go because I hate all these things, and I say that's why you have to go because you want to change the present situation because there are two parties, a leftist and rightist, so try to find someone who says it's my party, it's the only occasion that you can tell your opinion, then vote for that person and that party and then you can tell.
- Thomas: Do you find a reluctance to participate, to vote or participate in other ways, on the part of the students, a disinterest, an "I don't care, you can't do anything about it, they're always fighting and they're none of them any good"----do you find this attitude on the part of the students?
- Nemerkenyi: Yes. Sometimes I just like to provoke them. If I tell an everyday situation which originates from the politics but we meet every day, face the problem, we talk about it and the students always arrive that it is based on politics and I

hate politics. But then I always try to say, you have the chance to modify the bad politics so it's not good to retire, to say it's my own coffin so I don't keep contact with other people, so I always try to motivate them to practice democracy, I think it's very important, because I've seen it in my boss, they don't know what democracy is, they were brought up some years before me, they don't practice democracy. Sometimes I feel that I am more democratic than for example someone who has to be. Maybe it comes from the family. For 40 years they lived in a Communist era where there was no democracy, it is very difficult, I accept this, to learn what democracy is, but then don't put him in such a position that democracy is a basic requirement. So if you are unable to do this then you cannot have the power.

Thomas: My experience in the United States is that we are so brought up that you have to put in your two-cents' worth, you have to participate if you want to change things or bring about good that it's going to happen. But people do get very upset and disgusted and sometimes opt out, they choose not to be involved. But people say politics is America's religion and in a way it is because it is the one thing that everybody feels they belong in and are part of. But you have a double problem, of the disgust and the fact that among the older generation at least they are not used to the idea that that's what you have to do, because politics affects your whole life, you can't help but be involved.

Nemerkenyi: The other thing is, I have the feeling that the young people are not really taught democracy.

Thomas: Do the kids you're involved with, your students, have a sense that you've got to participate?

Nemerkenyi: No, no, and the other thing is that maybe it is a situation in Hungary: officially they have to prove that they teach the young people democracy, in the European Union there are programs that say the children should be taught certain things, that you have to right to vote, that you have the right to, so they organize camps for them and conferences so that they learn it, the European Union, so there are projects. But on the other side, what you can see here in Hungary, originating from the fact that the people who are now members of the ruling party have a Communist root and they still would like to tell everyone what is the right way, they don't take into consideration other people's opinion. Just, for example, about a week ago you could hear the former prime minister say that the man who is going to win, it seems will win the election, he wanted to instruct his own members to vote for their own party, the Communist, he said "We are the last legal pieces of democracy, all the other are not democratic"----you cannot say such a thing in democracy. You can strengthen the feelings of democracy in your own party but cannot tell that, now at the moment 65% of the Hungarian tax-supporting opposition party, so you cannot say that is not democracy. And the other thing is that in Hungary it's a very very big problem, the Communists who are now capitalists, they are not saying it in the same way as they did in the

Communist party. If what they say is not acceptable, the young people say that they are telling lies, they told different things 20 years ago, now they tell the opposite, the same person, and the same person is telling lies, one day he says this and the next he says something else, and that's why they are fed up with politics. They think why should I follow, it's not an honest thing. But with this some people think they intentionally want to deter the young people from politics, because the Communist party has a basis of voters among the elder people and if they can attract them to voting they will go voting, a lot of older people still vote along those lines. They want to keep them out of politics because this is an easier way for autocracy to flourish, have power. They are accustomed to vote for them, and they always say oh I received a lot of good things from them. Now their pensions have gone down but they still vote for them because they say they have to reduce my pension. But that's life, we have to live with them.

Thomas: One hopes to educate the young people, we do hope the young people will understand they have to get involved. People always say politics is dirty; well, life is dirty! You still have to work with people you think are dirty, because you have to work with other people even if you don't like them or think they're corrupt, you have to work with them. So the internet is widely spread, common.?

Nemerkenyi: Yes, I think in Hungary it's pretty common, so people have access to different language, different pages where the newspapers, the magazines, the internet use can be read so now everything is open for everyone, only the language knowledge is necessary.

Thomas: It's also known that you have to acquire other languages than Hungarian. But when I started doing this 8 or 10 years ago the use of the internet was not so widely spread, not anywhere, but that's changed. I think the internet is the most open, the most unrestricted, so far.

Nemerkenyi: Yes, and that's also a problem. I mean that sometimes very false news and information can be read on it and this can motivate people, and that's false information and in a bad and in a good direction as well, I don't say that it's only in a bad direction. But I don't like it, I like clean things. Of course in the newspaper you can also read false information.

Thomas: It's true, there's just plain false information, but you run into the problem, if you start to regulate the internet, of just who says what is true, because it's a very delicate subject and I don't know how it can be resolved but it certainly is going to be wrestled with, it has to be dealt with.

Nemerkenyi: But I think people have to be taught a kind of self-control, which is not a censor. What is acceptable for other people, then I can write about it, so you have to learn what is acceptable. I don't know how to do it, I don't know, it's a very difficult question. But I think that control should be everywhere, in

everyday life, if you meet someone, if you are walking along the street, if you are traveling you don't push the other, you don't throw another person off the bus. I think that should be learned or it should come from the person, should be brought from the family life. I think that control is very important because it's one of the basics of living together in a society.

Thomas: Absolutely. [Discussion of newspapers' self-censorship and the reasons for it being the values held in a society] But that's the question: do you think that the students are being taught basic true values according to what you think is basic, true?

Nemerkenyi: Unfortunately not, if they don't bring it from home, I don't think there is a chance for the teachers to teach them basic things. You know, although I am teaching at the university.....

Thomas: You are teaching geography, by the way?

Nemerkenyi: No, both of them, I teach at two different institutes, the other one is a college-- --college in Europe means it's after the secondary school---I am teaching English, sports-specific English, I teach sports language, and in the other institute I teach geography, geography and tourism in English. I always try to find, sometimes I spend one lesson by teaching them the viewpoint of different things, I don't mind if I spend one lesson because they are not told certain things which I think are absolutely necessary for life. I mean that they don't know how to behave sometimes, we discuss these things, what can you do during the lesson, what not, it seems to be stupid but if no one teaches them someone has to teach, not at the university but this is the last time you have the chance to teach someone. And then sometimes about certain things which happen in life, at the university, some actually things which couldn't have happened yet, and then I set up certain problems and then we try to solve the problem, the way of thinking. I don't want to press them the way I am thinking but to find a good solution that is good for everyone. So I try to teach them such things because they are very nice ones, I don't know whether in the United States it's the same but in Hungary nowadays the students between 18 and 23 seem to be very childish, so they start maturing a bit later. The other thing is sports, the people doing sports have even a different side of life because everyone is helping them to do the sports so that they become better and better so they remain more childish. So that's why I feel that I have to do such things sometimes. If cheating is there then we have to discuss. We have to discuss certain things what to do in your life, maybe you can do it now but we don't recognize it, in your life, in your family life, how can you do that. And sometimes such political things, but not because of the parties but because of the situation, and what would you do. I think it's actually very important and there is no chance for that.

Thomas: How do you teach that in class, do you act out the situations?

Nemerkenyi: I only ask their opinion, in discussion. I would normally have to teach the language but I sometimes, we do it in Hungarian, because it can't be expressed in a foreign language. If I talk emotionally I make many mistakes, when I'm talking with my head I don't make so many mistakes. I'm sure now it's full of mistakes because of the emotions.

Thomas: The students would have to do it in Hungarians because these are basics that you may not have a foreign language for. When you say the students don't know how to behave in class, give me an example.

Nemerkenyi: For example, maybe in Hungary it's special but the rule is that the students may not eat during the lesson or may not drink during the lesson, I don't know whether it's the rule in other countries. And I don't like it when they talk rough talk, swearing or talking ugly words. At the beginning of our courses we prepared a little piece of paper on which is written what do we expect from them, how to behave during the lesson, and not to use the mobile phone to send a message. I always tell them you may be teachers, I wouldn't send my son or daughter into such a school where a teacher is swearing, and it's very difficult after a time to separate that, now I'm not teaching and now I can swear, and now the next minute I'm already talking to students. So you have to learn a normal pattern of behavior.

Thomas: [Discussion of the use of laptops to take notes in class.] Do you have the problem of laptops?

Nemerkenyi: There are different courses, some are more practical. The sports courses are more practical because they have to do a lot of physical activity. In the sports classes the students cannot carry their laptops all the time, but for example the managers always do because they put the notes into their computers. Mostly I teach those who are doing sports and there they don't use computers, but at the other institute where I teach geography and mainly where I'm teaching business geography there they take notes but I can't control.

Thomas: That's where self-control comes in. [Discussion of learning self-control in the family long before university] These new gadgets present certain problems, as at concerts you have to turn off your cell phone, those announcements are still made in the United States.

Nemerkenyi: I think rules are very important. Since the change of regime, there are no rules in Hungary. That's the greatest problem. For a long time after the change of regime the situation was that, a good example, the police was representative of the state, of the Communist party, and you couldn't quarrel with them, you couldn't debate with them, you had to accept what they said otherwise you were put into prison. But after the change of regime for a long time the policemen didn't know what to do, they didn't want to interfere in problems where they would have had to do that, they didn't know what their rights are.

For five years almost everything was allowed in Hungary, this was a very bad feeling, I mean when someone was stopped by the police and then he answered oh I don't stop here now because I don't want to stop here now and he continued his way for example driving his car, because everybody felt now we are free, we can do what we want, so they weren't told that they have to behave the same way, only in civil situations, you have to be much more conscious to be able to stay with the person because maybe the person might be right, in the Communist era the person couldn't have the right because always the government had the right, so that was a different situation. And then now they try to follow with the rules to practice and I think that is very bad. I think the rules might be taught first and then you have to live based on the rules. And it's the same at the university. All the teachers say the students are terrible, they don't know what to do, but if you don't forward the rules to them, if you don't write it on the door, if you don't give it into their hands, these children were brought up in a very bad period when the rules weren't kept, so you have to teach them there are rules and you have to follow that. And it was a surprise for us at the time we started to give this piece of paper to them, these are the rules, we said oh they will be very angry and they will laugh at it, but they accepted it. Happily, because it was even then they know how to behave. At the age of 18 when they are still more childish than you can expect them, if they don't know how to behave, that's a good guidance. You can protest against it but you have to keep it because these are the rules.

Thomas: [Discussion of children wanting guidance because with it they feel safer, and of rules coming in a democracy from the people, and institutions' making their own rules]

Nemerkenyi: And the other thing is that with the change of regime everybody saw that now we are free and they learned their rights, but they didn't learn that if we want to live together with the other people they have also rights so we have to imagine and try, and they know their rights but they don't know other people's rights. I think that's a long period. I remember when we were in Spain, after the Franco regime was changed, Spain is basically a very Roman Catholic country, everyone knows it, and when we went there we were much younger, with my husband, and everywhere there were these sex shops and sex newspapers and journals, and we were shocked, and then everyone said it's only a few years, and then everything will go to a normal way, there will be some of those who are keenly interested in and would like to use that. And then it really turned out that it is the same in Hungary, for a long time there were sex newspapers, and then I asked how many read these, and then more than half of them disappeared. So step by step we learn.

But it's a long period. It's a learning process.

Thomas: So Hungary is in the stage of learning?

Nemerkenyi: Yes. I very hope that we will do it faster than it is at the moment but we have to go through this process, we can't avoid it.

Thomas: I wonder, in the Parliament do you think they're learning?

Nemerkenyi: No. That's the other thing. They went into the Parliament, they were voted to be members of Parliament in the bad period when these limits weren't so much acceptable or they didn't get the guidance. And the other thing is, because you mentioned that there are big oppositions between the two parties in the Parliament, they don't accept each other's opinions, I think the basis of that as well is that the Communists are still sitting there. It would be a better situation if the members of the old party, the old Communist party, would not be inside the Parliament, because that creates an opposition. I know they always give the example that this is not the same situation in Germany, this is not the same in England and so on, but they hadn't a Communist party ruling for 40 or 50 years. So I think that's the basic difference, that is why there is opposition in Hungary.

In very few of the former Communist countries, but as far as I know in the Czech Republic there are no Communists sitting in high positions. They forbid it but not in Hungary. Not in Slovakia and many other countries. It is still the situation that the former Communists when everything was state-owned became capitalistic and they bought everything, the factories, the firm for themselves, so they became capitalistic and even now you see and you know they are buying those things that are filling the hand of the state before another party will come, and I think that's the problem in Hungary, and that's why for a long time there will be no peace in Hungary. That's a tragic scene. How can you overcome things when you know that that person was my boss at the state farm and he bought the firm and now he behaves.....

Thomas: In the United States what we say is, "why don't you kick the rascals out".... I said this once to an interviewee and he said, "Because I live in this country I know that's a naïve question." Probably the problem is...the people don't really have the knowledge on which to act, on which to vote a good party in and a corrupt party out...and not enough experience in how to act in a democracy.

Nemerkenyi: They have to learn democracy.

Thomas: And that takes a long time. ... It's discouraging isn't it?

Nemerkenyi: The problem is we live for only 80 or 90 years! I'm the person who would like to see change, I don't accept all the opinions, I would like to be active in the changes, to vote, or to be able to, if I hear such a thing on the radio or the television which is not acceptable I always phone them and leave a message for them.

Thomas: Even though your life span is limited you've had children and you've brought them up. How do your children feel? Are they politically interested or do they just not care? Do they work and do they participate? How do they feel about the Communists still in power? They can have different opinions from you and still not be dead wrong.

Nemerkenyi: When they were smaller, you know, before the change of regime, for the first time we went to the March 15 demonstration, in 1988, my daughter was seven---I have two children, only two, one of my sisters has seven so she follows the family tradition---and my son was four years old. To tell you the truth, I was a bit afraid that there might be some problem because there were some hints that there were some political changes. On March 15 during the Communist era there was protest against the government, and we as a secondary school child, with some friends whom we knew that we have the same feeling, we went there and put one piece of flower and then went away. Some protested in a different way. When I met my husband at the university, was my partner at that time, we always went and did the same, and took some photos and went home. So we were taking the children, and to tell you the truth we were a bit afraid because we were standing there among a huge mass, and helicopters were circling around and we didn't know why, whether they were controlling the people, they wanted to do something, or they were just televising the event, and it didn't turn out there, so I told my husband to get to the side but there was something, if they see that there are children there they can't do that, so we had the feeling there are children there on the neck of the bank, they can't do that, they can't do that, we trusted and we hoped. So we were there for some hours and then we took them home because they were small children.

Thomas: Did they remember that?

Nemerkenyi: Yes of course they remembered that. And we had photographs taken by another friend whom we met by chance there, he was also with children, it is still a good memory. And then later on we were discussing the political problems at home which was sometimes not always very politic for my children because my mother-in-law who is old and has been living for a long time alone and didn't follow the political situation, and had such a thing that she intentionally or unintentionally said stupid things which we had to argue with. For example, in the Communist era a Communist was a Communist, and then later a prime minister became a former Communist in 2002, and in between when there was the change of regime he became a banker, a bank owner, and my mother-in-law thought that he's a very nice person, he has always been a bank owner, and then we said, do you think he could be a bank owner in the Communist time, and she remembered only the immediate past, that he was a bank owner, so we had to debate with her and the children didn't like it. Never mind, they anyhow followed the pattern, they regularly watched the television, and then after a time when there were the very big differences between the right and the left, they started not to be involved in this political

debate. But about a year before the voting----and they regularly read the newspapers, if they don't buy it they read it with us----about one year before the voting they started to be very much interested in it. Before that, two years before the voting, they said I won't go up to vote. Then I said ok. A year before the voting they start to be very much interested and share their opinion. Meanwhile, maybe during the three years between the two votings they want to rest a bit , they are not so much involved in politics but they always share their opinions if they hear a piece of news But about a year before the voting they read everything, they ask everything, they bring always these leaflets and they read it and they laugh or they are very angry with them, so they are interested in it and they always go voting, they always go voting. To tell you the truth, I trust 100% that they vote the same way as we do, only in case of some votings which was initiated by certain people that we want to vote in these questions and then in some cases they vote in a different way because they see it in a different way, but that's not for political parties, that's for certain questions, certain problems, which are important for everyone, for the nation.

Thomas: So even though you don't live for 200 years which is needed [to see changes], you see your own ideas going forward.

Nemerkenyi: Yes. I don't think I am an extremist person, I think maybe it's easier to accept than if you are extremely left or extremely right. But it's very interesting that in many families, that line, the extreme left or the extreme right, is a traditional thing, I see it with friends and colleagues.

Thomas: [Discussion of political position as opposition to parents' position] So one hopes there will be enough of the next generation who have been raised in democratic families who can cooperate with other human beings and work problems out together.....

Nemerkenyi: It was very interesting when we had to vote for joining the European Union or not. It was a very interesting period because we always heard it was very good to be a member of the European Union, we heard from other Europeans and officially from the government. We voted for it in 2004, the treaty was signed in 2005. The problem was that during the Communist era it was forbidden for you to show that you are Hungarian or not, you had to be an international, it was the slogan. So if someone felt himself or herself Hungarian and wanted to show it, for example in the United States you can put your American flag wherever you want, it's not a problem, no one says that you are a nationalist, in Hungary you couldn't do that, mainly because of the difference in the First and the Second World Wars and such things, I know that the situation is different, but I always have to be proud being a Hungarian, and I'm not nationalist, I don't think I'm nationalist.

Thomas: I have met so many Hungarians who are so proud of being Hungarian, I can't imagine how they managed to be genuine internationalists.

Nemerkenyi: I think it is important for us because we are in the center part of Europe, and all around there has been always either Germans or Slavic people living, and in the maximum time when there were about 50,000,000 or 20,000,000 Hungarians living that was the most, but we could have been dissolved in these languages. That's a good example, the Hawaiian people, within 50 years they have forgotten completely their own language. And we haven't forgotten, although for a long time we had to use the Latin language, then the German language, for 100's of years, and we still use the Hungarian language. I had an idea about 3 or 4 years ago, it came to my mind and now I tell it to everyone, that might be the problem with the Hungarians that we can't learn languages very easily, it is genetically based, otherwise we would have been already dissolved in other nations so that's why we could keep our language.

#### INTERRUPTION

We were talking about the European Union. And everybody said that it would be good for us, but we had just gained our liberty from the Soviet Union and we wanted to be Hungarian, and in the European Union they said you don't be Hungarian you will be European. It was too short a time for us the Hungarians to leave being Hungarian and okay, it's better to be in the European Union, so that's why I didn't want to join the European Union. And there was this voting and both of our children could already vote, and they said if not for you it will be good for your children, and then I said I am happy because none of my children would like to join. We didn't talk about it, I didn't tell them not to vote, but they themselves didn't want to become. So there was the conflict in me, because they said don't vote for yourself you are getting older, it's for the children, but the children didn't want to become part of the European Union, so it wasn't a problem.

Thomas: Didn't a lot of people vote for it?

Nemerkenyi: Very few people went to vote. Those went to vote who wanted to join.

Thomas: And how do you think it's worked out?

Nemerkenyi: I don't like it, okay, I accepted it that we are members of the European Union, but we are too small a country, doesn't have enough chance to have an effect on certain beats.

Thomas: Don't you have a vote?

Nemerkenyi: Yes, but we are in a small proportion, because it depends on the number of people living in Hungary, so it's proportional, not for each country one vote and then it would be legal, but because there are 80,000,000 Germans and 85,000,000 French, there are so many people living there, so they have more votes. I accepted but it cannot be fair, never can be fair for a smaller country. There are some very bad situations which I don't like, that we have to accept

such rules that are not acceptable here in Hungary, and we can't have our own decisions done in certain questions or certain problems, so to tell the truth I'm not happy. I'm still very happy that we don't have the euro, I like the Hungarian forint.

Thomas: Why? pride of country?

Nemerkenyi: No. Everybody in my family was brought up when there were forints, so why should I change it?

Thomas: It's sort of like the language. But you really don't have an equal voice, when the European Union makes decisions for its members. Are there other countries which don't have an equal voice with, say, Germany or France?

Nemerkenyi: Yes. And for example, I don't like it if there is a policy that, we want to produce 3 million barrels or liters of wine, but we don't need more, so cut the wine, and we give you money to cut the wine. For us Hungarians some of the wine regions are very traditional, very well known, we like it, and we have to cut it out, why? I think when you destroy something it's always worse than when you yield something, so I don't like the negative things, I like the positive things, and when you plant something and you grow something it's positive, and when you cut out because you will get more money for that, it's unimaginable for me, why it is good.

Thomas: And it sounds as if you're pressured to do things that don't necessarily benefit you, maybe benefits somebody else but not you. But you have to meet certain EU regulations, whether you like it or not, those are the rules.

Nemerkenyi: So I can imagine for example the Hungarian wine would be more tasty for a French person as well, but we can never get to know because we have to cut it out and we have to drink the wine they produce, maybe it's good for the French but maybe not good for us. There are so many different problems. That's globalization as well.

Thomas: It also sounds like central planning in Communism, where we need so many doctors so you have to become a doctor, or we need so many economists so you have to study economy.

Nemerkenyi: Yes. They decide two years ahead how many bananas they will buy. It's funny, isn't it? Even if I don't want to eat it it will be rotting there but we have to buy that quantity which we planned ahead. At home in my family if I have bread at home I don't buy bread until it's over, or in the weekend if I think it will be out then I buy a smaller piece and then I buy the new one. I think that you would have to be just like in your family, not making big plans for years ahead.

- Thomas: Although you do have to cooperate, and that's a tricky thing, to cooperate so that each country can do pretty well.
- Nemerkenyi: Yes, but I think now we Hungarians are not doing pretty well. I understand that would be a good idea but that would be Communism, when everybody gets the same amount they need. The real Communism is not what we had. The real Communistic idea was in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when in America a French person went there and wanted to create a Communist community, that was good, or in the kibbutz as they do, they produce and then they share in equal proportion how much they need in the family, but I think it cannot be done only in small size.
- Thomas: I had someone quote me an historian's judgment of Marx, "Wonderful ideas, wrong species". It doesn't work with people. On the other hand, there's globalization and the free market economy. I have heard it said that after the changes, companies, western, not always American, came into Hungary, bought factories and then closed them down so that that country could sell their products.
- Nemerkenyi: Sugar factories, for example. We had ten and all the ten are closed.
- Thomas: And chocolate factories, Nestle stopped it to sell Nestle. And that's free market economy.
- Nemerkenyi: I know. But you know, when I was a child, I think I still have the taste, I still have the taste but you cannot meet it. When we were under Socialism and we had a chance to go abroad, and we wanted to bring some present home, we brought something which couldn't be bought in Hungary. We brought it here and, maybe it was good or not, it was a present, we enjoyed it. But wherever you go you can buy the same things, the same taste, and that's what I don't like, the same taste. Because we had Hungarian taste here, and now you eat everything and eat unified all over the world because the crust is there everywhere and sometimes you want to have a different taste. It's very much standardized, put into plastic and you feel the smell of plastic in everything. And you can't have the real Hungarian taste. You know, for a long time with my husband we traveled quite a lot, every third year we had a chance, we received \$70.00 each, so we traveled and we always went by hitchhiking because that was cheaper for us. Although the \$70.00 lasted normally maximum 10 or 15 days, we always went for a month because we sometimes slept at railway stations because we wanted to see a lot of things. We always took some salami from home and I always cut very very tiny pieces and we ate it. When you are abroad you sometimes eat the local food and sometimes you have an upset stomach, I always took the so-called piros arany[*she spells it*], it is in a tube, it is paprika, Hungarian paprika and tomato is in it, a very special Hungarian taste, so if you have problems with your stomach, you eat it on a piece of bread and it completely at once cures your stomach. That's what the Hungarians take. It's a Hungarian taste, but sometimes there are small

firms, family firms, which for a number prepare cake and it has a different taste, it has no plastic taste, they always make it to leave it under a conservatory with gas, and then we say take out, it has a different taste and I don't like it. I like those things which have a special taste.

Thomas: That's one of the problems with the fast food chains, aside from the fact that they're often not nourishing and have harmful ingredients, they all taste the same.

Nemerkenyi: Nothing special, whether you eat it in Hungary, in Italy or in the polar circle, if there was such a thing. I don't like it. What is the specialty? I like it that in Italy they have different types of food.

Thomas: You want nations to cooperate but you cooperate so much in the European Union. After all, the French want to have their specialties too, every nation does, the Germans, the Italians, everybody has their own special food.

Nemerkenyi: So countries have to support anyhow to buy merely those foods which are prepared in their own home; they do it in some countries, in Sweden, in Italy, in Spain, in Hungary now they start telling "buy Hungarian", which is prepared by the Hungarians, so the smaller firms can survive, they are not eaten up by the big fish. But just returning for a short time to the period when we were traveling, it was very interesting that when we were married we had Dutch friends in the Netherlands. I was once interpreting for a person and we became good friends. So they wanted to invite us as a honeymoon to the Netherlands, and we weren't allowed to go because that was the year when we finished the university and we traveled one year before that, and every third year we were allowed to go and it was the extra [year] and they didn't allow us. And once my husband participated in a free show on television, and he won a competition where he was able to go to Portugal, and they didn't want to allow him. Then he protested and he wrote another letter that I don't want to go but I was presented with this chance, and then finally he was allowed to go as an extra year. I think that was the time when the money was limited, the \$70.00, and they hadn't enough money to give everyone every year the chance, so you could buy \$70.00 and there was no, the Hungarian forint couldn't be accepted everywhere at this time so we only could use dollars, so that's why the Hungarian government had to buy dollars to give it in our hands for our Hungarian forint.

Thomas: On the other hand, it was a convenient way of restricting people.

Nemerkenyi: Yes, yes. And then we were told, the visa was, if you wanted to stay abroad the maximum was one month, 30 days, and when we were in Turkey we spent two more days there because the Turkish people like Hungarians so much they didn't let us go, so it was 32 days, and everybody said aren't you afraid that next year you won't be allowed to go because you spent two extra days, but we had no problem.

- Thomas: But I understand that at the first you couldn't travel at all.
- Nemerkenyi: In the '50's and '60's, no. Into the socialist countries you could go whenever and wherever you wanted to go. In the capitalist countries you could go only every third year. The first time we traveled abroad, me, was in '71, but it wasn't to the western part of Europe, it was to Yugoslavia, which was western at that time.
- Thomas: What was your impression of the differences between life there and life here?
- Nemerkenyi: Nothing. They were socialist but they didn't give in totally to Russia and they were not good friends within the Communist bloc in Europe, and the other was Albania, and in the other part of the world it was China. And it was very nice that Albania had a good friend because it is such a small nation and it was China, but several thousand kilometers away!
- Thomas: When you went to Yugoslavia, did the fact that they were not tied to Russia or under Soviet domination, did that change life as you saw it as a visitor?
- Nemerkenyi: Yes, there was a big difference. There weren't so many checks, we were traveling on the train, for example, not so many inspections. Or you could buy lots of different things that you couldn't buy in the socialist countries, novels in English or in German, for example Solzenitsen books. We always got it from someone who went to Austria. One of my brothers-in-law was an economist, now he is retired, and he made business abroad and whenever he came home he always brought such books, put in the luggage in the center part of the luggage underneath a lot of clothes, because if they found it they took it away. Solzenitsen was forbidden to read in Hungary.
- Thomas: And when was the first time you were able to go west?
- Nemerkenyi: Besides Yugoslavia, first we went to Greece and Turkey in '75. Greece was completely different, Turkey was on a much lower level in the development so I couldn't compare the two. In Greece everything was allowed, there was a different feeling when you were walking up and down, although the Junta was still ruling a bit but it was much freer there. The next time we went was to Spain, we stopped for a short time in France, in Switzerland for some days, and Italy on our way back. Then we in some cases realized that in some other western European countries, although life seems to be freer, there are also very strict rules. You know, there was a period when all of the foreigners coming to Hungary had to give their passports at the border or somewhere, and they had to check in that they are staying in Hungary, and if they stayed at a private family the private family had to take the passports at the police station and they had to check in that they are staying here in Hungary. When for the first time I went to the Netherlands in the '80's, we were living together with a family, then we also had to take our passport to the police and they checked us there and they didn't give back my passport for some days

because the person we had to deal with wasn't there. I was walking up and down without a passport, being a Communist citizen, and then it was a surprise for me that when we realized that we didn't get the passport back, we went back to the police and the Dutch citizen with whom we lived was speaking to the policeman just like in Hungary we are speaking to a child, "how can you do that?" and such things, and in Hungary it wouldn't have been, oh my god, we were trembling, and it was such a surprise, and then "ok, I am terribly sorry, we will take the passport" and within an hour they took the passport by car to the home. But that's the same situation. So I felt that when there was a Communist and western bloc there weren't so many differences in the state, I mean they were controlling the Communists, the Communists were controlling the capitalists, the police also asked these Communists to check in, in their own country, although they always scold the Communists, why did they have to go there, so it wasn't so very surprising.

- Thomas: Did you find that there were more goods in the shops there? Although I've been told you could get anything in Hungary if you paid under the counter.
- Nemerkenyi: Yes, yes Well, I wasn't accustomed to paying under the counter, I hadn't enough money to buy under the counter. What was necessary for me I could buy it. Maybe my parents would talk about it, but I didn't realize it.
- Thomas: I've had different reactions: one person went to Paris in the '60's and said it was so light and bright, and Budapest was so dark. One person went to London and said it looks like they'd had no war---of course it had been repaired---whereas here the castle still hadn't been repaired.
- Nemerkenyi: Yes, but I think here in Hungary we had a different, another problem. In 1956, we were punished by the Russians who totally shot everything apart, so we had to do it twice, after the Second World War and now in 1956, we had to invest a lot of money. All the houses were completely destroyed during 1956 when they returned and then they shot everything. There was a difference when I went to Moscow in 1978, there was a big difference between Moscow and Budapest. First of all, the shops were really out of everything, in Russia, people could really buy vodka from under the counter. What was interesting was that Courvoisier cognac could be bought freely because it was expensive for them, and you know I think there was a better exchange so they exchanged goods, and they didn't know Courvoisier cognac, which is a very good quality cognac, when nobody bought it, and everybody wanted to buy that cheap vodka. So we could bring it home as a present. It was very difficult to buy anything. When we were in the hotel in Moscow, we left the luggage in the room, and when we returned the lady who was working in the corridor came after us into our room and said "I want to buy this and that" so she went into while we weren't there and picked out those things she wanted to buy, because for example the jeans weren't available in that country, and she wanted to buy that, and the pullover, she said I want to buy that, and I said I have to go home, I need the pullover.

So I don't think it happened in Hungary. I heard for example girls were happy when they received real nylon stockings in the '60's, but that was very many years ago. In the '70's you could already buy them in Hungary, the Italians bought a lot of such things, but that was a very short period in Hungary. So I don't remember such great differences between Budapest and Moscow, so it was much worse there or in Berlin. So I don't think in Hungary we had the problem that we couldn't buy whatever we want. When we talked together with my friends or relatives it was always that we wanted to have the feeling that we are free, it was much more important than buying physical things, it was much more a psychological thing, we wanted to be free, not to be able to buy more things or luxuries. Even now for me it is much more important to have someone ruling the country in which I feel well, not better, not richer, not to be able to buy more things, but to have a good mood, so I think it's more important for everybody, because you can buy everything or you can't buy everything but it doesn't make you happier, if you buy everything that you don't need. It's good if you feel well and have the things you want around you, but if you have everything but you cannot enter a building or you cannot leave your home, then it's worse. I think it's still important for many people here in Hungary.

Thomas: In my interviews many people have said that one of the great advantages with the changes is that you can go anywhere, any time; the restrictions to the country and the limitations when you did go was a restriction that people deeply resented.

Nemerkenyi: That's what I felt when the East Germans left Hungary, in 1989. I'm still nowadays crying when I see the pictures and I have the memories. It's so difficult to talk about because that's what was shocking, that they left everything behind for the freedom, they left the car, they left the luggage here and they took the child only by the hand and they were running through the border to nowhere because they didn't know what to expect there or if there was any chance for their lives there, and they did it. I always watch the pictures when they show it on television because I like to relive it all the time. And I'm teaching the geography of touring but of course we talk about Germany and Berlin and you can't avoid talking about the situation when Berlin was divided in two parts, and when I'm telling them sometimes my voice disappears, I can't control it, I try of course. And the students don't understand it because they were born to freedom already, and it's a feeling you cannot have unless you have tried the other side.

Thomas: {Discussion of children not understanding their parents' experience} People have told me that when the East Germans came over into Hungary and they didn't have any place to stay the Hungarians took them in, and they have even maintained that friendship.

Nemerkenyi: Yes, What do I mean now, the problem in Hungary, it's already part of globalization: for example, when I was a child when a foreign car stopped in

our street in Budapest, in the central part of Budapest, and they were looking for something they couldn't find, it was quite natural that my parents invited them to our home, we gave them dinner, and then if they couldn't go anywhere we gave them a place to stay in Budapest, although in the countryside it was much more normal to be hospitable. And it is what I'm missing now from the Hungarians. And they are surprised. We have Dutch friends and their children came to Hungary once, with a friend, and that was the time when one of my sisters had a house, and they went on a holiday, and I am living in the city but they had house with a garden, and they told me go there while we are away so you can have the children in the garden and it was like a holiday for us, and we had a flat empty and we let that boy and the friend live there while they were in Hungary. They were so shocked that we gave them the key and they can stay there in the middle and they don't do that any time. I was shocked, if I can't, I know him personally, and I know the parents, why shouldn't I give him, it's empty and I have the space, why shouldn't I give him, it's quite natural.

- Thomas: People have told me they think there was a greater sense of community under Communism and more individualism under capitalism and... [the older people miss the sense of community].
- Nemerkenyi: They only have their own property and don't want to share anything. When I was at school we always shared the food...not now. Some of the colleagues have cars, we have no car, we go to the same place, they go home alone sitting alone in their car, and they don't offer us, we are living on the same way, I would never expect it, but they don't say come with me you can drop out of the car or I stop there and you can get out of the car.
- Thomas: Do you think this sense of community came from the fact that everybody had a common enemy, namely Communism. Whereas now there's no common enemy....
- Nemerkenyi: Yes, maybe. It's interesting also, for example, that during the Communist era more people went to church than now. That was also a kind of protest. In the '60's, not before, not in the '50's, the '50's was the worst, they didn't dare, but from the '60's and '70's no one checked or if they did no one cared. But more people went to church than now. That's also a kind of lifestyle when there are no restrictions, and religion can also be a restriction, so maybe that's general all over the world, but now I have a feeling that more people attended the masses than now. And that's also that we had more friends then because we met the friends there and after church we were discussing matters and we were talking to each other, sometimes invited to the home to drink coffee together; now we are becoming individualized.
- Thomas: I suppose the churches do not have quite the influence on the development of values, of mores and standards that they used to have, because people don't pay as much attention to them.

Nemerkenyi: They try, but people don't accept it now, it's not important for the people now. I think there are no big differences [between the churches], although what I realize here in Hungary is that the Reformed churches are more politically involved in things than the Catholics, more active, the members, not necessarily the leaders. Of course the Protestants always wanted to protest against certain things so maybe they are more active, the Roman Catholics traditionally accept a lot of things, but it's a surprise for me, I am a little bit ashamed, although we obey the rules it doesn't mean that we have to remain stupid, in politics, so we have the brains, why don't we use it in good things.

Thomas: They have a tradition of being more active. Well, it is time to stop. Thank you very very much.

[End of Interview]