

INTERVIEW WITH MESI NYILASI (b. 1/28/1963) November 14, 2010

MT: Major Thomas

MN: Mesi Nyilasi

MT: This is Major Thomas on Sunday, November 14, 2010, and I'm at Csorsz utca 5 in Budapest, Hungary, and I am interviewing Mesi Nyilasi. Let's begin, Mesi, by asking you when and where you were born and a little bit about your family.

MN: I see, okay. I was born in Budapest in 1963, January 28th. My father was a waiter and my mother was an accountant, and I had, I still have a sister, ten years older than me. Unfortunately my parents have already died. And we lived in the center of Budapest, in the same flat all my life before I got married and then moved out.

MT: And your parents both worked?

MN: Yes, until they got a pension, and for some years, maybe ten years they were pensioners.

MT: And where did you go to school?

MN: First I went in the same street where I was living, it was a primary school, then I went to the eleventh district, it was a secondary grammar school.

MT: Did it have a name?

MN: It was called Kaffka Margit.

MT: Oh yes, it was named for the writer.

MN: Yes, have you heard of her?

MT: Yes, I have read some of her work. I guess that was the gymnasium. So you finished the gymnasium.

MN: Yes, it was 1981. Then I went to the university, it was in the center of Budapest, this was the Eotvos Lorand University, it was biology and chemistry, and after that I worked for a year and then I started university again and my major was English.

MT: So you changed your subject in a sense.

MN: That's it, that's what happened, because after that I began to work as an English teacher.

MT: So after you went to the university a second time----the same university?

MN: The same university but another faculty, the faculty of arts.

MT: And after you graduated there you taught.

MN: Yes, I taught adults in the evening for almost fifteen years.

MT: You taught adults in what we would call "night school"?

MN: That's it, yes.

MT: What specifically did you teach?

MN: Basic English, from the beginner level up to the first certificate. English language, it was language classes.

MT: And did you like that?

MN: Yes, very much, for a while. Later, when my son was born, and I had to teach in the evening, I think I got bored a little with it by that time.

MT: That was how many years after you started?

MN: When I started teaching, it was about in 1988, because I was teaching while I was going to the university as well.

MT: When did you first learn English?

MN: In the gymnasium, in the secondary school.

MT: Was it usual to have English taught in the gymnasium? Was that common?

MN: By that time, yes. That was '77 to '81. In the elementary school I had French and Russian.

MT: Did you have a choice? You could learn whatever language you wanted to?

MN: When I went to primary school, Russian was compulsory for everybody, from the age of 10 until finishing the university. But there were some special elementary schools where you could choose a second language, and mine was one of these, and that's why I could choose French. But I started learning French earlier than Russian, at the age of 8. In the secondary schools you could basically choose any language, but you studied Russian at the same time.

MT: Do you speak Russian now?

MN: Speak? Well, I can read very well and I can write as well, but speaking is not so good. Everybody of my age had to study Russian when they were young, but they dropped it whenever they finished school. But I'm interested in languages, that's why I've continued.

MT: Yes, I've had people tell me how long they studied Russian but they can't read or speak now, it's as if they did but they've kind of forgotten, don't want to remember now.

MN: It's because we were absolutely demotivated, everybody hated that it was compulsory to study Russian, and we were not interested in Russia at all, because we saw them as oppressors.

MT: Was this teaching of Russian, not just languages but in other fields, in history for example, did you have to learn Russian history, or did you learn history from the Russian, or let's say Communist point of view?

MN: There wasn't special history teaching on Russia, but in the language books or the units were built up in a way so that we always had a bit of Lenin. Stalin not any longer, when I was young Stalin was out of the language books, but about Lenin we had different texts. And about of course the Communist revolution, every year around October or November we had a text on this revolution of the Russians. It was the great October revolution, which according to the present calendar started on the 7th of November.

MT: So you might not have had direct history teaching but it was brought in in other subjects.

MN: In Russian language classes. And of course in our history classes there was a part when we learned about this, and all our history teaching was based on the Marxist elements.

MT: So you didn't have "This is one philosophy of history and here's another one and here's a third one"----you didn't have comparative historical theory. It was all taught from the point of view of the Communists or Marxists.

MN: That's it, and it was stressed again and again and again.

MT: Was that found oppressive or was it persuasive when you were young?

MN: Well, we were young, we didn't realize this. Later, when we thought back on these history classes, we realized, okay, they said this to us again and again and again, and it was based on this philosophy.

MT: How did this affect your life? Well, tell me what life was like, when you were growing up, in school or out of school, before the fall of Communism.

MN: Well, life was very very much different. We couldn't go----before I was born my parents basically couldn't go to the western European countries ever. By the time I was born or grown up we could go to western European countries I think once every two years. We could only get a certain amount of foreign currency and it was a very low amount. And you could only get this amount from the state legally; if you wanted to get any other foreign currency you couldn't get it legally. Of course there was this black market where you could get it, but if you were caught you could even be sent to prison.

MT: But it still went on, there still was a black market.

MN: Yes, there was. And then when we were allowed to go abroad once every two years, then of course everybody went to this black market and got some more currency.

MT: And what was the length of time you were allowed to stay? A short time because of the limitation of money?

MN: I think there was a limitation of time too but I'm not quite sure because I was very young at that time. And otherwise the big difference between now and then was that all the shops had the same type of goods. You could get everything, so you could get basically all kinds of food and all kinds of clothes, and some of these televisions but not very new and also not the new technology. But if you wanted to eat something or wear something you could go to the shops and everything was quite cheap compared to the salaries. But there wasn't a big variety.

MT: So you didn't get everything, you got a lot of things, but not everything, and it was cheap what there was available.

MN: Yes, that's it. And it was very easy to get a job, everybody who wanted to get a job could get a job, close to the part where they lived, so that wasn't a problem at all. And if you went and did some work at the workplace you just got your salary. If you did some work, because they could give everybody a job in a way that usually many more people were taken into the company than the number of people who could do their job, so you went in, you stayed eight hours but that didn't mean that you had to work hard.

MT: So you had a job but you didn't necessarily do a lot of work. You did some. Did you really stay for eight hours of working, or was it shorter than eight hours because there wasn't that much work to do?

MN: Well, legally it was eight hours, and after eight hours everybody went home, but I think that in some companies you could sneak away, yes. My mother and father didn't do that. They stayed eight hours. My mother stayed eight hours because my father was a waiter and he worked on shift and it was eight hours too.

MT: Yes, he worked different shifts at different times. I have gotten the impression that some people only worked half a day, and then they would have, at least in the '80's, they would have a second job in the afternoon doing something that they----well, I remember one couple bought some land, and made a tennis court, and her husband taught tennis

because he played tennis very well and he taught tennis in the afternoon whereas he had another job in the morning.

MN: Yes, that's true about the '80's, mainly the end of the '80's. What I was talking about was in the '70's or '60's.

MT: And you didn't have second jobs then?

MN: Well, I don't think that much, because the salary was enough for buying the things that you could buy. Living was cheap, clothes were cheap, food was cheap, so it was okay. But I think about the '80's, I'm not sure about it really, but around that time there was inflation, because before that we could live well, because the state had a lot of loans from abroad, so they borrowed a lot of money. But by the '80's they had to pay back, and they couldn't really because they didn't invest it, they didn't do anything with it, they just made jobs for everybody and they just spent the money, but by the time of the '80's they had to pay it back somehow, and that's why the inflation began, and in the '80's we couldn't get on so well on our salaries and at that time started the second jobs system.

MT: So earlier you could really afford living, you could afford everything----

MN: Everything basic, not luxury. But luxury you couldn't buy because it wasn't in the shops, it wasn't available. I mean, I think there must have been an upper class who knew about these things and they could get it from abroad, but I didn't belong to that class so I don't know much about that.

MT: Who was that class?

MN: I guess the Communist party leaders and their friends and the leaders of companies, the general directors and maybe higher-rank officials and bosses of different companies, but we didn't belong to this class so I don't know much about it.

MT: Was this just kind of general knowledge, you didn't know them personally but it was generally known that they lived at a different economic level?

MN: Yes, you see we are now in a quite luxurious part of Buda, and these luxurious parts of Buda did exist at that time too, and we saw the villas and we saw that they had cars, because for getting a car in the '70's, you had to sign up for a car which was extremely expensive and still you signed up and after waiting for ten years you may have been given the car. But we saw that they had cars and they must have gotten the money from somewhere.

MT: Or you had to have strings, you had to have influence. That would be the high party officials that lived like that. But everybody knew that? it was common knowledge?

MN: I think so, yes. But we just accepted it. I think it's much more difficult to accept this when you can't buy the basics either. But when I can get all, there's no luxury, okay, but I can't see it in the shops and everybody is at the same level. But that's a very big thing, because now everybody lives on different levels, and everybody sees the other person, oh, he can get more money than I can, how does he do that, how could I get more and be at the same level as them. But at that time everybody had a flat, old furniture, cheap clothes, cheap food, and it was okay.

MT: So you think that there was a level of contentment, people were satisfied with that?

MN: I don't think so, and very specially don't think so because our parents, the people who are about 60 or 80 now or more, they are very, very nostalgic about this era. They don't accept when we tell them that the government could only do this because they had these loans from abroad and this couldn't go on forever and ever because once they had to pay back. But they ignore it, they don't mind what we are saying, they are still very nostalgic and they think it was wonderful because it was such a good life and there was no stress and no worries.

MT: So at the time it was a fairly content time for people.

MN: Yes, it was the Kadar era, it was the goulash time because every Sunday you could put a goulash on the table and you didn't have to think about at the end of it how can I buy meat, because it happens all the time now, now meat is expensive and money is short.

MT: Do you think that it's just the older people who are nostalgic? Or do some younger people hear about that and wonder about the present? Do people want to go back to those times? does anybody except the older nostalgic people want to go back? Does anybody want to go back to Communist times?

MN: There might be some (young people who want socialism back) but I have never met them. And especially because they (older people) lived through much much harder times before the Communist era. During the wars, the First World War and the Second World War and the parts after the Second World War when they didn't have money, they didn't have food, they didn't have flats and they didn't have clothes, nothing, and then after twenty years, oh, I can get my everyday meals, what a wonderful thing this is.

MT: So Communist times were better than what preceded , the wars and.....

MN: The Communist times after '60, the goulash socialism, because in the Second World War we had nothing, and we had this terror.

MT: So it was both the war times, economic hard times, and the Communist terror.

MN: And I think when Kadar came they saw him as a savior. He has changed the whole thing, there was no terror any longer, we could have everything, every basic thing for us, and this is what happened. And they feel that we have lost this heaven, and I don't know whom they blame for it, but never the socialists who built this heaven, who kept borrowing money which they couldn't pay back.

MT: So the Kadar times, those Communist times, are not looked back on as so terrible.

MN: The Kadar time, no. Earlier, yes, absolutely.

MT: What else would you say about those times?

MN: Well, my age group, my contemporaries, people who are about my age, were not so much very happy about it, because we didn't know harder times than that, but we could hear about western things because we listened to the radio. And every second year we had the opportunity to go abroad, we went not very far because we didn't have much money, but we went to Vienna, for example, and we saw the shops, and we saw that everybody had cars, and we met people, and we thought that that was heaven and not our socialism, and we thought that we were imprisoned in our country because we couldn't go whenever we wanted to, and I think we were looking toward the western countries. So we were not so much happy. But it's interesting, because now I see that I can travel anywhere, it's okay, wonderful----but how? I haven't got the money for it! (laughs) And there's a bigger and bigger and bigger gap between the lower classes and the middle classes, and the middle classes are going down and down and down, and that helps people think that socialism was such a good thing.

MT: (summarizes Mesi's discussion) So Communism doesn't come off as so bad?

MN: You should ask those people who were imprisoned and tortured in these eras. They would say something different. I feel very much for them, and I still see that it was cheating, because it wasn't true that we did well because it was just borrowed money and it was cheating the people which they couldn't do forever and ever. And the other thing, the cultural side of it, for example, I studied English in the secondary school but we didn't have good books about it, we didn't have tapes, we didn't have anything to make language learning more interesting or more effective. And after that when I was an English teacher it was such a good thing, I just recorded things from the TV, because I

could see recording a country's TV programs in the original language, this was unheard of during the socialist era, so you couldn't get to the culture of other people, and the books that were translated were absolutely censored, and some books couldn't be translated and you could never get to them, except from the black market. (laughs)

MT: I have heard that there was one source, at least in Budapest, of English language books and magazines and that was the British embassy, they had some kind of library.

MN: The British Council library, yes, I went there.

MT: So you used that. And I've heard that there were some few bookstores that maybe on back shelves for selected customers there were some English, some foreign language books..

MN: And I missed this very much, because I'm a lover of Anglo-Saxon culture, and it was so bad even during the university, which was in the '80's basically, it was very difficult to get the good books. That was the time when I studied English language at the university, the time when our source was the British Council library. (The university) had a little library, a really little library, and we took books from each other, but the books that we learned from were all written by the Hungarian teachers at the university. These were lectures in paperback.

MT: Did you have access to, maybe not contemporary English literature, but did you have access to the classics, like Austen and Dickens, to these English language books?

MN: These were all translated. The translations you could all the time get during the university classes, in Hungarian.

MT: But this doesn't give you access to the text in the original English.

MN: No, that came much later. But, for example, Dickens was taught in the secondary school, in Hungarian.

MT: So it was English culture but through the Hungarian language.

MN: Yes. Of course, when we talked about these works, we always talked about them through a socialist, through socialist glasses. And then usually those were taught which-- --because Dickens wrote about poverty, so this fit wonderfully into socialist philosophy.

MT: Did you see the changes coming? Did you think or know or suspect that communism would collapse?

MN: At that time I was between twenty and thirty, I think, and I was very much interested in other things (laughs), so basically it came to me as a surprise. The first minute I saw on TV that the rules changed, they opened the border for the Germans to meet here, as a matter of fact I still don't understand how this happened, without any blood, without any revolution, how could these things happen, I have never understood.

MT: I get the impression that very few people saw it coming. I interviewed one young man who is a high school teacher and he was always analyzing and felt that it was not possible for it to continue, it simply didn't work, I'm sure he knew about the government's debt, so he said in a way he wasn't surprised because he always thought well, this can't go on, it's just not possible.

MN: I think if you look around there are regimes where you can see they can't go on but they still press it to go on, for example the North Korea government where people die of hunger but the leaders just don't mind, they go on and go on and go on. So something must have happened to change this.

MT: Most of the people I've interviewed didn't have an inkling, were amazed when it happened. A lot of people have also spoken of the euphoria after it took place and Hungary was free. Was that your experience too?

MN: Yes, absolutely. You know, we had these posters on the wall, and there was a big fat Russian army officer's head on it, with a cap which they were wearing, on which was written "Good-bye Russians" or something, I don't know, and it was such a good thing. This happened when the last bit of the Russian army was withdrawn from our country, that was when these posters went up. And since then we still celebrate this day. I will look this up on the internet and send it to you----I'm very surprised that no one else has mentioned these posters to you yet.

MT: I don't think so. I have heard that there was graffiti on the walls that said this, that the people were glad to get rid of the Russian soldiers.

MN: This is particularly a bit that I will never understand, how the Russians decided to take out their forces without any blood, there must have been some agreement between America and Russia or I don't know. Or the Russians decided that oh, we can see that other countries don't do it with force but they do it economically, and we are going to do that, we don't use force anymore but we dominate economically, as with giving us gas, these gas pipe lines that come from Russia and then they can control how much we use. I don't know much about it.

MT: Do you think that the fuel is rationed?

MN: No, they don't do it, but most of the gas comes from them, and I think, if they wanted to, they could cause us a very uncomfortable situation.

MT: Do they regulate it by the price they charge?

MN: I don't know, as a matter of fact, these are just wild guesses, so I couldn't say anything responsibly about it.

MT: But there was happiness when the Russians withdrew.

MN: Absolutely! Absolutely!

MT: I've also had people tell me that they didn't realize that life after Communism would be so difficult, and that there's a certain amount of disillusionment in people----I see you're shaking your head "yes" to this.

MN: (laughs) Yes, because I think in the '90's, '91 was I think when the border was opened----

MT: That's when the Russian soldiers withdrew.

MN: Okay. And then we were told, well, you need ten years to get to the same standard of living as people have in Austria. And since then more than ten years have passed and we are very, very far away from the standard of living of the people in Austria. So we thought if there is capitalism then everybody will be rich at the same time and everything will be absolutely fantastic. And it turned out that for most of the people, it is only shown what they could get if they had that standard of living, so they can have a look at the things in the shop windows, they can see it on the internet, what they could do if they have the money for it, but most people don't have the money even for basic things now.

MT: So aside from luxuries, even basic things are expensive now?

MN: Very expensive, yes, it's very difficult to make ends meet on the money you get. It's absolutely unbelievable how little salaries some people can get, and I'm unable to understand how they live on those salaries, because if you have to keep up a flat and pay

for the electricity and heating and gas and so forth, basically their salary is enough only for that and they pay it at the beginning of the month and what then?

MT: So salaries are then generally low? Or there are some that are a lot, and some low, and some in between? I'm trying to get a sense of the general situation, if the salaries are low for most people, or if it's very variable?

MN: There is a lot of variety. I think some people can get a hundred times as much as other people. If you are a professional and if you have a job, then it's okay, you can live on a normal standard of living, you can have your flat and you will have food and clothes, maybe a car. But those people who are not professionals and they don't have their own business---- because if you are a good electrician or something and you have your own business then you can live very well on it---- but most of the people who are not officials they are employed by somebody else or by a company or by the government, and their salaries are extremely low. I think this is the same the extent of the country, and if you have a look at professionals, those who can get a job at international companies, then they can get very good salaries, they can afford a house, a big car, a good school for the children, going on holidays, but this is a very, very narrow layer of professionals, there are not very many of them. Most of our friends belong to this category, they make a very good salary. They are about ten years younger than us, so they are about forty, they were just leaving the university when these big companies came into the country, they needed a lot of people, and they were looking for young people coming from the university, they took them, and in a very short time they could make their fortune in them. If you are a bit older, like me, this age group wasn't taken, we were too old when these big companies came, but now these jobs are filled up. The younger ones who leave the university now are not in such a good position again.

MT: So there are not companies continually coming into Hungary?

MN: I wouldn't think so, I think some have already withdrawn. And another thing I have realized is that these big western companies go farther and farther east, they go to

China or somewhere where they get an even cheaper labor force. So they stay for a while while it is good for them, and then they cancel their business here and make another company in Viet Nam or somewhere.

MT: And the government employees are not well paid?

MN: What do you mean by that, because there are two separate layers of this. There are those people who work in the ministries, I think they earn a reasonable salary. But those people who are teachers or kindergarten teachers or who work at the local government, they get extremely low salaries and it's very hard to live on that.

MT: What does your husband do? Is he a teacher too?

MN: He works at the university, and he does research. And research workers get nothing, basically.

MT: So he's an academic. Does he do only research? Does he teach too?

MN: He teaches very, very little. He's a physicist and an astronomer.

MT: So he does little teaching, mostly research. He doesn't get much money unless the research is funded by a wealthy source.

MN: He says their research is basically not funded by anything. They always have to hand in their applications for funds. And then all the researchers try to prepare these applications, they hand them in, and then the government decides, well, you can get one-tenth of the money you have applied for. And this happens every year, they have to apply for these little amounts of money. And now it happens that legally they have got this money, they have got a promise that they will get this money, but the government doesn't pay it because they don't have anything to pay it from. And this is the situation where my husband's research is now. And they can only pay the salaries of these

researchers from these research funds, but they don't get the money, so I don't know what will happen.

MT: And there aren't many private companies doing research, or who would fund the research?

MN: Private companies? I don't think so, or very few. So research is going down.

MT: And you are retired? Or are you still teaching?

MN: I am not retired. I will only be able to get a pension when I am 65, and at the moment I'm 47. And the age limit when you can get a pension is going higher and higher and higher, and the money you can get when you are a pensioner is going lower and lower and lower. And they don't know what will pay for future pensioners. I stopped teaching ten years ago and I went to work for a Hungarian company where I use my biology and chemistry again and my Russian and English.

MT: What is the nature of the company you work for? And what do you do?

MN: It's a pharmaceutical company. I work in documentation, which means that if you are a pharmaceutical company and you want to sell your medicine, every time that you have produced an amount of medicine then you have to take a sample of it and you have to examine it very carefully whether it is okay, whether it won't cause any problem, and for these analytical examinations you need a lot of documentation. I prepare these and I translate these into English and Russian.

MT: I'm under the impression that pharmaceutical companies make money, and therefore have the finances to pay good salaries. Is that true in Hungary?

MN: Mine is a Hungarian pharmaceutical company and it does not pay as much as multinational companies do, but my salary is okay, I think, we can live on it, it

compensates my husband's low research salary. We have got a house and both of us has a car, we have only one child, and this way we can just make ends meet on this money and it's okay. When it comes about holidays, sometimes we have to think about it, whether we can afford it this year or not. Something we always can do, we stay in the country, don't go abroad, and we still have a holiday, but sometimes we can afford going on holiday abroad.

MT: So you are probably economically above average.

MN: Yes I do think so, our family is economically above average. But as I have already said, the professional salary is so very much different from the non-professionals, which is I think is the greater percentage of the population, that our salary together must be well above the average.

MT: Well, do you think there is a lot of discontent in Hungary now as compared with the general feeling under Communism? How would you evaluate that?

MN: I think there is a very, very big amount of discontent now, and it depends what you compare to. Because the '60's and the '70's people were just okay, but between '80 and '90 they were not so very much happy about things, but still I think the discontent is bigger now than at that time. Because in the '80's it already started that you could only get on if you get a second job, otherwise you won't be able to pay your bills.

MT: And what do people blame it on? Do they blame it on capitalism? They can't blame it anymore on Communism or Russia. What is the focus of the anger or discontent?

MN: I think you may have heard about it, that our country is now very much split between left-wingers and right-wingers, and left-wingers think completely differently than right-wingers. Left-wingers think that socialism was a good thing, they are nostalgic about it, they think that capitalism is the cause of everything and they blame it on it. And

right-wingers think that we had eight years of left-wing government, and right-wingers think that this left-wing government has totally ruined the country. So if that had been different we would be in a much, much better position. The period of left-wing government----2002 to 2010---- just stopped in the spring now.

MT: I have heard this, and that getting anything done is difficult because there's no cooperation between left and right. Is this true?

MN: This had been the situation up until this year's elections, but now basically everything is in the hands of the right-wing government. The local government and the government have got almost 70% in the parliament so now they can do anything they want, and now we are waiting, at least I am waiting, whether they will use this for the good or for the bad.

MT: Things can get done, things can happen, because one party has such a very large majority.

MN: That's it. So if they have got good ideas and they can make them happen, then I think we'll get out of this which we are in now. On the other hand I think this is too much power in one hand, so they might make mistakes without anyone to stop them. They basically do what they want. At the moment they are changing our constitution.

MT: Can they do that?

MN: They can do that because 70% of the parliament is in their hands. I'm not a left-winger, so I'm hoping that they are going to use this awful-lot-of-power for good. But people are just people, when they have too much power I think this could lead to not a good situation, so I'm a bit scared, but I'm still hoping.

MT: This is certainly different from what I've heard in the past. The past 7 years or so has been a period of great divisiveness, the complaints I've heard are that nothing

happened, it was a stalemate, nothing happened. So now something is going to happen, the question is what. In our country the constitution can only be changed by an amendment which requires a considerable vote. Is there a similar process in Hungary?

MN: Well, the parliament has to vote about any change in the constitution. But if you have an absolute majority in the parliament, and all the people belonging to the party think the same thing (because sometimes it happens that they don't, but this party is one in which the party members think the same thing all the time) so they can do it. The power is in their hands.

MT: And there isn't any check? Suppose the party wants something and then the people as a whole think that's unwise or it goes too far.

MN: Well, in the previous government there were absolutely great scandals. The head of the government made a secret speech to the party members where he admitted that they had been lying to the nation, and he used bad language, four-letter words, and this was released, and everybody in the country could listen to this speech, where he said that. This was Gyurcsany. And he could not be removed. Everybody was out in the streets demonstrating against him, and he didn't do anything. He didn't shoot people who were out in the streets, he just didn't resign and stayed and said, well, they will get tired and they will go home. And basically he was right, because after a while, after half a year of demonstrations everybody said, okay, we are demonstrating but what for, nothing happens, and demonstrations gradually finished. But: when the elections came, they lost. But while they were in power, people couldn't do anything against them. And this happened quite at the beginning of their second term, and for two or three years more they could do what they wanted, although people were thinking, these people are mad. But they had no legal right to change it after the elections, and of course at the elections people didn't forget about it, and that's why the right wing got such a big power now.

MT: So his own party didn't try to remove him as a result of this scandal. I would have thought it would have been in the party's interest to get rid of him because then the right wing couldn't take over in the elections.

MN: But at least for a year after this speech he was still in power. And when his party saw that there was so much feeling against him, I think in the last year of their government they changed and then came Bajnai Gordon, their last prime minister. So they changed his person but not right away when these demonstrations were, maybe a year later or one and a half years later. They backed him.

MT: But wasn't there a prime minister removed? Medgyessy? Didn't he resign in the middle of his term, or maybe not the middle but during his term? Maybe Gyurcsany came instead of him, and I seem to remember that it was legal for him to leave, that is, Gyurcsany came in not illegally.

MN: No, no, not illegally at all. I don't know much about this because I was so disappointed with this left-wing government that I just didn't deal with the whole situation at all.

MT: Do you think that's a common feeling?

MN: I don't know. Quite a few people may think the same but I don't really know.

MT: You can get people who are so outraged that they take action or you can get people who are so outraged that they just turn it off. I wondered if Hungary has both kinds of people.

MN: I think both kinds, because after Gyurcsany came it was a major scandal, really very many people went out in the streets to demonstrate against him.

MT: I've heard that the experience of the Hungarian people under communism is such that they don't see any possibility of change, and therefore they may say they don't like something but they just kind of give up. But I don't know if that's true. It doesn't sound like it in your time; it sounds as if they thought they could get rid of it if they made enough noise.

MN: I think there are several different layers of the society, and I think it rather goes by age. I think the people who are the age of our parents, 60, 70, they are not the kind who go out in the street. They are quite left-wing-ish because of this nostalgia. But I think people of our age much rather go out in the street. And I think young ones might be the ones who think, well, the most important thing for me is to get a good job and get enough money, and after that I don't mind anything. If I have got my own living and I'm okay, and I can put my children to good schools, why do I mind what happens in the country's life. But this is my personal view so this might not be true.

MT: Other people have told me that young people are much more interested in money, that getting ahead in their careers, which means making more money, was the main focus of life. This was a criticism of the young, that they don't have much sense of the community, of the welfare of the whole society, that did exist under communism. Do you think that that is true?

MN: People didn't have very much personal ambition because there was no way for ambition, but everybody lived their own little life in their own little way, and I don't think they cared much about the welfare of the whole country or politics. Yes, everybody was equal, nobody got ahead, and on the other hand they didn't have to be scared getting to the bottom of society. Now there's this choice: either you go further and you will get it, or there's the scary side.

MT: So there was a sense of security under communism that doesn't exist anymore.

MN: That's it. You don't feel secure at all anymore because if you lose your job you will never ever get another one if you are above 35, whereas you have to work until you are 65, and what are you doing in those years?

MT: So I would think that this would make people look back on communism as a kind of golden time or even want it again. I've also heard that working in a factory gave one a sense of community, they even did things together on weekends, and families were involved.

MN: I think it was made compulsory, these communist Saturdays, and it was organized that the workers go to theater together, or things like this. I only saw my mother, and she wasn't very happy about this, she thought that, well, okay, I will work for eight hours but after that I want to be home with my family, I don't want other people to organize programs for me, I can organize my own programs.

MT: Now there's more a sense of individual ambition and striving.

MN: Yes, and it's because now you get as much work in an eight hour job as you can only finish with in twelve hours. So you don't have time for socializing with your colleagues, you don't have time for anything, you just work and work and work so you can go home at least after ten hours without feeling that you have left half of your tasks for the next day and the next day you will get another load of tasks and you will never get to the end. So it's very difficult to talk at work with your colleagues because they force out everything from you. You're very much pressed with work now. It's another very big difference because at that time you were happy at your workplace because you could do your work, visit, talk to people, socialize with your colleagues, eat in the working hours, and now, ten hours are not enough for making the work, so you don't even think of socializing. So I think this might have been what they were telling you, that being at work was a relaxed thing, so they were happy at work, they worked a bit but also they socialized and it was okay.

MT: I've also been told that now money is the big goal, and it isn't necessarily to buy things with, it's somehow just the habit of money, or money as prestige.

MN: I rather think that people want the money so they can have a house, they can have their cars, they can go on holiday, and they can send their children to good schools, but not for money itself. Money as prestige might be important for another layer of society which I'm not part of! (laughs)

MT: I see! When did you first go abroad? And where did you go?

MN: I first went abroad when I was 10 years old and went to East Germany with my family, and it was wonderful

MT: At that time did you see much of a difference between life in East Germany and life in Hungary?

MN: No, it was just about the same. When I was 18, that was the first time I went to a western country, I went to Austria, and then I saw a big difference. It was '81. We went into shops and we saw different clothes that we had never seen. And at that time, for example, bananas we had to queue for around Christmas, because then we could get them but only if we waited for a long time. Well, that might have been before '81, I think by '81 you could get bananas but not mangos and dates and other things. And clothes were absolutely different than you could get here, much, much better quality and much more fashionable than you could get here, and everybody was better dressed. In the '70's you could go to a restaurant here and it was not expensive, but the restaurant was a bit shabby, maybe the plaster was coming off the wall, and the waiters were not very kind. But in Austria you saw that the restaurant was really expensive, but if you went in everything was beautiful, and fashionable, and comfortable, and everybody is very nice to you, if you have the money to pay for this. And for example if you went to museums, museums were free everywhere in Hungary but they were shabby and not interesting, but in Austria you saw that you can make a museum very interesting, and they were clean

and freshly painted. Or for example we have got very many wonderful old buildings like little palaces in the countryside, and at that time they were used for storing grain in them and the plaster was coming off and they always were wet, and nobody thought of renovating them to save this wonderful culture. But if you went to Austria you saw that everything is conserved and they cared for their culture. Or we went across the border, and we saw that the Hungarian houses, all of them, the plaster was coming off and the gardens were not very well cared for, and when you went to Austria, just one kilometer further away, everything was wonderfully painted and everything was in order. So you saw that people had the money. So I think that when you don't have the money for making your house as beautiful as you would love to see it, then you won't have the inspiration to do anything either so people didn't plant flowers in their garden, but in Austria it was all different, at least it was well cared for. If you have the money and time to care for your environment then you feel like it and do it, but if you always see I can't afford to buy a new plant then you give up in the end, I think.

MT: So in Hungary people had enough for basic clothing and basic food but not enough to add a little extra to their houses or their clothes or their gardens.

MN: Yes, that's it. And there was no blame to it after a while because people see that everybody needs the space and it's okay.

MT: So [the contrast at the border between Hungary and Austria] was the result of the economic situation.

MN: I don't really know because I'm a different person. When I didn't have enough money for buying wonderful furniture then I was thinking about how to make that little that I have with little money still look quite nice. But my mother was absolutely different, she didn't feel like doing this, and I saw that all the other neighbors and everybody I knew felt the same and I still don't understand what caused this, because I was brought up in the same situation and still I felt I had to change my life and make it more beautiful and cared for. Sometimes I think with little money you can do it if you want to change it.

MT: There probably is that difference in personalities.

MN: But why was it the same in the whole country?

MT: Well, of course you are influenced by your neighbors and your environment. [brief discussion of this subject] Where else did you go in the west besides Austria, or did you?

MN: Later I had opportunities at the university as well and at work as well and sometimes we had enough money to go on our own. Britain, actually it's my favorite country, I think I've been there at least eight times, sometimes three weeks, sometimes just a few days.

MT: When did you first go there?

MN: I think '91. I love the language and I loved all the books that I'd read, I'd studied it at the university and even for the entrance exam I'd read a lot of things, and by that time Sky News was available and I had watched it----that's a TV channel that showed England.

MT: What impressed you most?

MN: The beautiful countryside. If you just go around Budapest you will see that every house is built in a different style: one looks like a Mediterranean villa, the other one looks like a country house, the third looks very modern.....

TELEPHONE INTERRUPTION

In the English villages the style, the new and old buildings match each other because somebody had the thought about it, that we should care about the whole picture of the village, and everybody still has their own traditions that go back for a very long way. Our traditions----that's it!----socialism, they have taken away all our traditions, they said

everything that happened before socialism was just nothing and we should hate it and forget it. You have never been to Hungarian villages but before the socialist era we had our own style of country houses and they were beautiful really, and they just destroyed them and in each village they built houses that were 10 meters by 10 meters and had the same roof and they were all next to each other, and they painted them pink and yellow, and everybody lived in these houses and forgot about all our cultural traditions.

MT: I've seen a little of that in Budapest: you can see the great grey blocks that the communists built, and sometimes in front of them where they didn't destroy everything the charming smaller older houses..... {discussion of garden-like qualities of England}

MN: And the whole system of society is absolutely different. I was absolutely amazed by this thing, that here, old people get a very little pension and it is normal that they just stay at home, do nothing, try to live on this pension, and don't bother anyone; and in Britain they have got all the clubs and social meetings and different institutions and old people are just the same (as young ones), they have the same rights, of course officially they have got the same rights here (in Hungary), but the attitude (in Britain), the old people are actually different (British ones from Hungarian ones) because they (the British) have got the self-confidence, they feel that yes, I'm a very important part of this society, they don't feel that I'm not really a part, and they have got a really very active social life, and do different things, and I just love this. On the other hand, in Hungary parents and children are very much close together and when children grow up they still care for their parents and visit them regularly, but in Britain they usually move to another part of the country 500 kilometers away and meet their parents once a year, and that was something I didn't like quite so much, but that's got nothing to do with socialism.

MT: I had somebody tell me they went to Britain, I think in the '70's, and they felt that London was like a city that had never been bombed, whereas back in Budapest there were still parts of castle hill that had not been fixed. But of course it wasn't just World War II destruction, it was also '56 destruction. Did you have that experience?

MN: Absolutely. In the street where I lived still when I went to university you could see the holes in the plaster on houses where the bullets came in, and that was absolutely depressing for me, and it was unbelievable that there was no intention to make our surroundings more beautiful or more normal at least.

MT: On the other hand, that is a record of history. You want to repair some destruction, but some bullet-ridden buildings are a testimony to history.

MN: But when the whole town is like that?

MT: Yes! It's a matter of degree, I guess. And the British wanted to build their cities back very fast, and they had the money----well, they didn't have much money at first. And they set aside certain areas that preserved the historic destruction.

MN: I think after the Second World War there was the Marshall plan, to which our government said "No thanks, we will do it alone".

MT: I'm not sure it was offered to the communist regimes. [Brief discussion of Marshall Plan] I had one person tell me when they went to Paris in the '60's they were so stunned by the lights, because everything was aglow, Paris was a City of Light, it really was, whereas Budapest was so dark.

MN: Yes, interesting, we have British friends, and when they came here we talked about what they found very different, what culture shock they had, and that's what they said, it was just a dark town compared to other big cities, everything was dark.

MT: I wonder how much of that was economic; after all, it costs money to illuminate. Where else did you go besides Austria and Britain?

MN: Skiing in France, to little towns in France, to western Germany, Bulgaria, Transylvania, these are the main places I have been.

MT: And any other contrasts between your country and other countries?

MN: There is one more thing. When we went to Vienna it was so interesting that you can have some humor or something interesting in everyday normal life. For example, there were these trams where they weren't just yellow, each and every one of them, but the bodies of people were painted under the windows, so there was somebody sitting there, a man maybe, and from the outside you saw a different body!

MT: Really! That's like a public joke!

MN: Yes. And then we understood, this is kind of being a prisoner in our country, that nobody thinks of making life more interesting and more enjoyable, the same thing I have told you about museums, because our museums were always very static. Now museums are absolutely different because they are interactive for children, they have got very special games which makes them be interested in the subject, and by playing that game they get to know many more things. If they just walk next to these glass containers they don't read the labels but it's not taken in context, why is this piece of pottery important and interesting.

MT: That might be a relatively recent development in exhibitions in museums even in the west, I think.

MN: Yes, but still I met this earlier abroad than in Hungary and certainly not here in the socialist era, only afterwards.

MT: Well, what else would you like to say?

MN: Well, I think that basically I have told you what came up without thinking about it. When we first exchanged letters I thought that I should have some prethinking about it but I didn't have the time.

MN: Actually I appreciate your not doing anything, because sometimes I think when you don't prepare then as you talk you remember other things, more things come up that you can't remember ahead of time because they spontaneously arise. You have given quite a contrast to others' interviews. I have often heard discouragement with the present, but perhaps the change in the elections this year has somewhat changed that. It doesn't seem that the parties are at such loggerheads; even with only one party in power at least it can make some changes.

THE END

Mesi Nyilasi (b. 1/28/1963)

Mesi Nyilasi is the daughter of a father who was a waiter and a mother who was an accountant. Born and raised in Budapest, she took two university degrees, one in biology and chemistry, one in English. She taught English language classes for adults for 20-odd years and later, as well as now, does work in documentation for a Hungarian pharmaceutical company. Mesi has many insights into both the political mood of Hungary under the Communist regime and now, after the spring 2010 elections, and into the different cultural situations under the two types of government.

Discursive Table of Contents: Family background and education---Work---Travel during Communism---Economic and cultural life under Communism---The Change of 1989---Current political attitudes in Hungary---Sense of security during Communism and now---Hungarian traditions and Communism