

An Interview with Odon Orzsik

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

Interviews conducted by
Virginia Major Thomas
in 2007

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Biography

Odon Orzsik is a pediatric cardiologist practicing now in Slovakia and Hungary. He is of Hungarian descent but was born and brought up in Czechoslovakia (now Slovakia). As a child, he learned five languages, some taught him at home by his father, who was a doctor. He attended the medical school of Comenius University in Bratislava (Pozsony in Hungarian, Pressburg in German), and after army training in medical school and a regular army stint he returned to his home town and practiced like his father in a hospital as an employee of the state under Communism until the changes of 1989. He discusses many aspects of life under Communism and life now in Slovakia and Hungary.

- Thomas: Major Thomas
- Orzsik: Odon Orzsik
- Jakabffy: Miklos Jakabffy, translator
- Thomas: This is Major Thomas on November 21, 2007, and I am in Dunaszerdahely, Slovakia, and we are interviewing Odon or Edmund Orzsik. We'll begin by asking Odon or Edmund when he was born, and where, and a little bit about his family.
- Orzsik: My name is Edmund Orzsik, in Hungarian Odon. I was born July 15, 1959, here in Dunajska Streda (Dunaszerdahely), so I am a local patriot here. I've lived here for 48 years. My father, Edmund Orzsik senior, was also a doctor, he died two months ago, we buried him on his 80th birthday. My mother Ophelia Orzsik was born in Zurich, she was a teacher and she died last year. So I am alone, I have no brothers or sisters, no siblings, so I am now alone with my family.
- Thomas: You were born and brought up here?
- Orzsik: Yes, I grew up in Dunajska Streda (Dunaszerdahely), I went to the schools in Dunajska Streda (Dunaszerdahely), the elementary school, the secondary school, and the medical university I attended in Bratislava, it was the medical university of Comenius University in Bratislava. The old name of Bratislava was Pozsony, or the German name was Pressburg because it was a main city of the monarchy.
- Jakabffy: And the seat of the Parliament, the upper house.
- Orzsik: The Parliament in 1848, I think, before the revolution, and there is a church, St. Martin's Church.....
- Jakabffy: The coronation church.
- Orzsik: Yes, in 1800's the kings were crowned there.
- Thomas: Tell me a little bit about your education.
- Orzsik: I started my school September 1, 1965, it was here in Dunajska Streda, it was a Hungarian school, it was a 9-year elementary school, from 1965 til 1974.
- Thomas: Was the instruction in Hungarian?
- Orzsik: Yes, it was a Hungarian elementary school, but we also learned the official state language which was Slovak, and then from the 6th grade Russian, this was in the old regime, the Communist regime.

- Jakabffy: It was mandatory.
- Orzsik: Yes, mandatory. Russian was mandatory, in the Hungarian schools from the 6th grade, in the Slovak schools from the 4th because they just had the Slovak language, in the Hungarian schools there were the two languages, Hungarian and Slovak. So I learned Russian for 9 years.
- Thomas: Do you speak it?
- Orzsik: I speak it, because I have a colleague, she is from Mongolia, she is half Mongolian, half Russian, and we are working together in the hospital, and each time as I meet her I speak with her just Russian, so I don't forget it.
- Thomas: I have run into a number of Hungarians in Hungary who had 10 years or more of Russian but claim they cannot speak it. They can read it, but I think they don't want to speak it.
- Orzsik: There is a difference between Hungarians and us, because we live in Slovakia. Slovakian belongs to the Slavic language family, but for Hungarian there is the Fino-Ugric family, just Finnish and Hungarian, and they don't understand each other. But if you know one Slavic language, Slovak or Czech or Polish or Russian or Serb or Croate or Bulgarian, you can understand, not everything, but it's easier to communicate.
- Thomas: Yes, I've heard that 40% of the vocabulary is common to all the Slavic languages.
- Orzsik: You know, I was born in Czechoslovakia, it was Czechoslovakia in 1959, from I think 1960 it was the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, so in Czechoslovakia there are two official languages, Czech and Slovak, Hungarian was never an official language, just what the minority speaks.
- Thomas: Is that really two languages? Can't they understand each other?
- Orzsik: Yes, surely, they can understand each other. For example, in my army time I was in the Czech part.
- Thomas: And you could understand everybody and they could understand you.
- Orzsik: Yes, surely, and I speak Slocezech a little bit!
- Thomas: I'm particularly interested in what kind of history you were taught, under the Communists. You probably started in the gymnasium, not in elementary school.
- Orzsik: In elementary school also we had history as in Hungary, and it was that our friend is the Soviet Union, we are in the proletariat internationalism, the

brothers in the socialistic countries, everything is in the socialistic realm, everything is run in it. You know, my mother also was a teacher. She taught chemistry and biology. My religion is Roman Catholic, all my family is Roman Catholic, and in the old regime it was not allowed for a teacher to visit the church. There were very big problems. I go to the church now and each Sunday I am in the church. In the Communist regime I also attended the church and in the capitalist regime I also attend the church. Now it's a fashion for some people attending church, but we were Catholic in the Communist era also. My mother was a teacher so it was not allowed for us to go to the church in Dunajska Streda, because the Communist party was watching everything, and if they got the information that there is a teacher who is attending the church, how can she teach the people if she is a Catholic if she doesn't believe the Communist ideology because the Communist ideology is atheism. God doesn't exist, and if a teacher is a Catholic then she can't teach.

Thomas: So how did you go to church?

Orzsik: We started to go to the church in a little village near here, it was the village of my mother, where she was living, she was born in Bratislava, and in a little while, in a couple of years, the information came that the teacher is attending the church in Hollitza, so we had to go further. The next stop was Bacs, it is.....

OO/Jakabffy: It is a pilgrim destination for Maria. The first village was 10 kilometers from Dunajska Streda, the other was 18 kilometers. There are nuns there, and we went there for, I don't know, 15 years, and then there were problems from informers. You know, the Communist regime functioned on the basis that everyone was watching, everyone was spying, and they gave information, "we saw a teacher in the church here and here" and it came to the Communist center and pffft! if you will attend the church then you can't teach, you have to leave. Then the last era before Communism fell, it was a suburb of Bratislava, 36 kilometers away, so we finished there. And after the fall of Communism it's perfectly normal and quiet to go here in Dunajska Streda.

Thomas: So what you were taught in history was not from several different points of view but only a view of history from the point of view of Communist ideology, is that correct?

Orzsik: Yes. I finished all my schools in the Communist era, I graduated as a doctor in 1984 and Communism fell in 1989, 5 years later, so my whole education was the Communist education.

Thomas: Did the teachers you had, particularly in history of course, subscribe to the Communist ideology or did you ever have the knowledge or the sense that they skipped over some of that, they didn't teach it with conviction, or maybe they inserted a few other views, was there anything in the teaching---did you have skepticism about this point of view?

Orzsik: Surely we had.....

Thomas: Was that from your family or the school or both?

Orzsik: I'll tell you. If you check the location of Dunajska Streda, we have a good location. From Dunajska Streda to Budapest is 120 kilometers, about 70 miles. To Vienna is the same, about 70 miles. To Bratislava, 30 miles. It's a good location. There are 3 countries, Hungary, Austria, Czechoslovakia. To Brno it was 200 kilometers, that is 130 miles. And we were so lucky that we could watch the Austrian television.

Thomas: And what did you watch, or see?

Orzsik: On the official socialist television there was just one program, and everyday you just heard the Communist ideology, propaganda, from the Czechoslovak television, from the Hungarian television the same, but we had the luck to watch the Austrian television also, and Austria was an independent state from 1955. Austria had also been under Russian occupation but in 1955 the Russians left, it was great luck for Austria and we got to watch Austrian television. And my father liked foreign languages. My father comes from a little village, his father was a farmer, and the Slovak-Hungarian border was not far from their village, he showed me a couple of times, it was 2 or 3 kilometers to the border, they belonged to Hungary. You know, there was a shift of borders. As you know, Hungary was on the side of Germany, and they lost the war, and so from the big Hungary only a little bit was left, in 1918. Then in 1938 a part of it came back to Hungary, and then it came back to Czechoslovakia.

Thomas: I think that Hitler curried favor with the Hungarians by giving them some of the land that had been taken away at Trianon. And so you watched Austrian television?

Orzsik: And I told you my father came from a little village, a farmer family, but he wanted to reach more, he didn't want to stay in this little village. He was a very clever man, and he thought if I learn, maybe I have the chance to go out from here. He went to schools, he went to the priest who taught him Latin and German and French, he went to gymnasium in Levizsa. It was a very hard time, every day he had to go 9 kilometers on his bicycle, but he was very strong, he had decided to go out from there. He was born in 1927, and when he was to graduate from the gymnasium the war started. The front was 2 kilometers away. There were the Germans on one side of the river and the Russians on the other. He already knew languages, and if a German would come in the village they called him to be the translator. He loved foreign languages, he learned English, French, Spanish. But he couldn't finish his studies. After the war he had to go to Hungary, unofficially, because his house was bombed and all the animals killed. You never knew this because America never had a war. So he unofficially went through the border and finished some

school years in Hungary. After the war he finished the gymnasium and in 1952 he started the medical school in Bratislava, the same medical school that I attended starting in 1978. He finished in 1958, he was then 31 years old, unable to complete school at the usual age because of the war. And after, it was also the Communist era and it was this way, that if you finished medical school under the Communists you couldn't choose where you wanted to go. You got a paper, here is your destination, you have to go here. They didn't ask you where you wanted to work. The party gives you a document, you have to go here or here.

Thomas: Was that true also when you graduated from medical school? Did they still tell you where to go?

Orszik: No, no, no. It changed. Already my parents knew each other, my father graduated in 1958 and they were married. And my father was lucky, he had to go to middle Slovakia, and there was a colleague there who got a place in Dunajska Streda, and she was from middle Slovakia, and they exchanged papers, documents, so my father came to Dunajska Streda, because my mother was from a few kilometers from here, and my father worked here all his life, he worked here for 42 years. It was important for my mother to be close to her home. He was very well known here, he was a pediatrician and a specialist in cardiology, like me, a pediatric cardiologist.

Thomas: Did he have an office with a private practice?

Orszik: It was not a private practice. There was no private practice under the Communists.

Jakabffy: In Hungary there was.

Orszik: He worked in the hospital, in the pediatric department, and he had an ambulance, he was an ambulatory doctor, but for the state, not in the private sector, in the government sector.

Thomas: He worked for the state, everybody worked for the state. But getting back to watching the Austrian television.

Orszik: I wanted to tell you that the languages came from my father. I learned English at home, also German at home, because as a little kid I had an old lady, she was of German nationality and she taught me German. I was a little kid, 2 or 3 years old, and I had an exercise book, she drew me pictures and wrote the German words, and so the first steps I got from her and from my father, and it was easy for me, and as I watched television I understood, just as they say, kids watching television, watching, watching, and one day you understand. It's the same with my older son, we didn't know that he speaks German, but he just watched the German television, and in the secondary school the teacher asked me, "Why didn't you tell me your son speaks German", "My

son speaks German? I didn't know that"! I think he has the same talent for language that I got from my father. My father also taught me English, we had the English language books, and in the summer when we went on holiday my father took the English language book and I took the exercise book and each day we did a lesson, I wrote down the exercises.

Thomas: So when you watched the Austrian television you understood what they said.

Orzsik: Yes I understood. It was the best program to see, and we watched it. If you watch television every day, it could be Chinese or Japanese or whatever, you learn it. In the school you learn that everything good comes from the Soviet Union, but something not the same. And my parents, a doctor and a teacher, they knew that not everything is so as they tell us in the schools.

Thomas: They were people who were thinking for themselves, they had been taught how to think, so they were questioning because of their training as well as because of what they heard on the television. So you went to the university.

Orzsik: I went to the university after 4 years in Dunajska Streda, the Hungarian gymnasium with the Hungarian language. We had Hungarian, Slovak, Russian and English. There was a choice between German and English, because I already spoke German rather well I chose English. I already spoke English also but I had to choose something. In the old era it was not the fashion to learn foreign languages. Traveling was very, very hard, you can't imagine, there were times when to go to Hungary you had to have an invitation.

Thomas: I thought that was just with the west.

Orzsik: No, Hungary also. It was a Communist country, it was a friendly country to us, but they said it's foreign, you can't go there, you have to have an invitation. Half of my family lives in Hungary, it was not a problem, I have a couple of relatives in Gyor, a couple of relatives in Budapest, a lot of friends in Hungary. For us in Dunajska Streda it's closer to Gyor, Bratislava is 50 kilometer, Gyor just 40, it's about 6 miles closer. Today also if people want to go to the cinema they don't go to Bratislava, they go to Gyor. 80% now of Dunajska Streda is Hungarian, it has about 23,000 inhabitants, it's the poorest Hungarian town in Slovakia. If they want to go to the cinema, they don't want to watch it in Slovakian, they go to Gyor and watch it in Hungarian. Everybody speaks Hungarian.

Thomas: Was it difficult in then-Czechoslovakia to get into the university without a peasant or worker background? For you, for example, specifically?

Orzsik: When I started to study medicine, it was very popular in that time. Not anymore. There were a lot of students who wanted to study medicine, it was numerus clausus, they had room for 300, and 1100 or 1200 students wanted to study. This was the medical faculty of the Comenius University. But in the old

era, there was protectionalism, it means if you have connections you can get there. Officially, that was correct, if somebody had worker roots, then they were preferred. For example, I had a colleague who was a worker in a factory.....

Jakabffy: (translates) He was a skilled worker in the metal industry.

Orzsik: He was a worker, he finished the so-called gymnasium for workers, can you imagine, in one year he finished the 4-year study. He was a worker, maybe he was a member of the Communist party, I don't know, I don't want to say because he was a good guy, but if somebody is a worker he does not have the education of somebody who studies 13 or 14 years the secondary school materials. Maybe he was a member of the Communist party, but he finished the school in one year. But in the university, after the first year, bye-bye. It was too heavy for him, he tried to make it but he didn't have the roots, he didn't have the basics, chemistry, biology. It was the same in my father's era, if they came from the proletariat they were preferred. But I was a good student. In Slovakia the best grade is one (1). In Hungary the best grade is five (5). I had just ones.

Thomas: Is that how you got in, on grades, or did you also have connections?

Orzsik: I also had connections, but I was a good student. It was not necessary for me to take an exam for the medical school because I had just grade one, and it was the rule that each student who has just ones is automatically in the school. I had also the protection, but it was easier so.

Thomas: Was it your father's example that made you want to become a doctor?

Orzsik: I think yes.

Thomas: So then when you graduated, what happened?

Orzsik: I graduated in 1984, it was in May, I started with the work in August here in Dunajska Streda.

Thomas: You could come here freely, you were not told where to go?

Orzsik: It was easier because I was from Dunajska Streda, my father was known, he told the director that he would like his son, he would like to work here, so okay, the problem what would he like to do, pediatrics also, so I got here, I started in August. But you know in the old era, army time was compulsory. And in the university we were soldiers. We had 2 years, for 2 years, one day a week we were soldiers, we woke up at 5 o'clock, we had uniforms and there was a place in Bratislava that was the medical military academy for the medical school, and we had teachers who were mainly doctors but army doctors, and they taught us what to do in case of war. So they taught us the

army side of medicine, we were taught what to do in case of war, how to work in the field hospital, the MASH.

Thomas: So it was really army medicine you learned, there wasn't a lot of emphasis on marching or shooting.

Orzsik: That also, that was part of the ceremony, can you imagine, doctors with automatic weapons! It was funny. We went on maneuvers, and they took the maps out and they started, this is the Austrian border, here is the enemy, the First Motorized Brigade from the U.S.A. with the German army, and here are we with the supporting Soviet armies, and now who will defeat whom. But you know, everybody laughed about it, because we knew it was silly. The soldiers had green berets, they had green brains also, they thought in that way.

Thomas: When you got out of medical school you had to go in the army for what, 2 years?

Orzsik: It was just for one year. In Czechoslovakia for every boy after 18 years it was mandatory that he go in the army for 2 years. But we were enrolled in the university and we went to army medical training for 2 years, so we went to the army for only one year, it was shortened for us. I was lucky, I went to Pilsen, in West Czech, not far from the German border, and I was there for just one month, it was a preparatory course, and then I went all over. I went to Bratislava, to Koniggratz, it was a very nice town. I got that assignment through protection: a family friend's brother lived in Pilsen, he was police chief, and he checked which places are available, and I got the best place. It was Bratislava, at the medical university, Bratislava also had a medical university and there was a branch medical university for soldiers. I was for one year the doctor for the students who were attending the medical school as soldiers. They also finished as doctors but they were army doctors.

Thomas: Did you teach? Oh you didn't teach the medical students.

Orzsik: I was like a doctor on an ambulance, my chief was a colonel, my patients were the students of the army medical school. Our chief was a general who was a specialist in hematology.

Jakabffy: This was a general practice for you?

Orzsik: Yes.

Thomas: But you had trained in pediatrics.

Orzsik: But that didn't matter in the army!

Thomas: That's true! When you got out of your year, you came back, and did you, like your father, practice at the hospital, as opposed to a private practice?

Orzsik: In the hospital, no private practice. I came back. If you finished the medical university, you were a doctor. For specialization you study later. It was in 1987 and I wanted to study cardiology, and for this I went for 3 years to Bratislava, to the heart clinic at the medical university.

TAPE MALFUNCTION

TAPE TWO

Orzsik: ...traveling, freedom of religion, freedom of thinking.

Thomas: Freedom of speech?

Orzsik: Also. And the thinking, it's free what I say and I shouldn't get any trouble for what I think.

Thomas: You didn't mention anything in discussion of the Communist period about terror, about frightening situations, and I've noticed before that many people I've interviewed have not said anything about that but some have.

Orzsik: In the old era it was with people who were in politics and who were thinking unlike the majority, who had their own opinion and this opinion was not the same as the official Communist thinking. They could be frightened because they had problems. They could disappear from one day to the next.

Thomas: And this was in Czechoslovakia.

Orzsik: It was the same, it was Czechoslovakia, it was one country, I think in Hungary it was the same.

Thomas: So it did happen.

Orzsik: It did happen. It was long, and it was enough.

Thomas: And you had to be careful about what you said and where you said it.

Orzsik: Surely, surely. I think in the old era, it couldn't happen that I would give an interview with an American lady who was asking about the political and the other situations in the country. Nowadays it's not a problem.

Thomas: You don't have to worry about what you say when.

Orzsik: I hope so!

Thomas: In Czechoslovakia, did the Communist regime begin immediately upon the end of the war in 1945?

- Orzsik: No, it was 3 years of capitalism. In 1948 Gottwald started with socialism. He took the companies and factories from the capitalists and nationalized them and so started Communism in Czechoslovakia. It was in Prague in 1968 when we tried to get away from Communism, but we had proletariat help from other socialist countries, it was the Russian invasion, the armies of the Warsaw pact, the Soviet Union, Eastern Germany, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, they gave proletariat help against the terror of capitalism, that was the official word. I can't remember if Bulgaria, because in 1968 I was 9 years old, I can't remember everything.
- Jakabffy: But I remember that we were so badly ashamed in Hungary.
- Orzsik: How did you feel about that? that Hungary joined the invasion?
- Orzsik: We were told just about the Russians, we didn't differentiate because the soldiers' cars were the same, everybody had the same car, the same coloring, everything was green, they were marked with a white line. I remember during the hours in the school we counted how many soldiers' cars we saw, the record in one day was 600.
- Thomas: So you didn't have a feeling of embarrassment or shame that the Hungarians had helped put down the Prague Spring?
- Orzsik: No, I didn't have that feeling, but we get it back nowadays, that the Hungarians also were members of the Warsaw Pact.
- Thomas: I have heard Hungarians in Hungary say that they felt very bad about that. Well, thank you very much for talking to me. And thanks also to Jakabffy Miklos for translations, questions and contributions.

[End of Interview]