

An Interview with Emil Pastzor

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

Interviews conducted by
Virginia Major Thomas
in 2003

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Biography

Emil Pasztor is the director emeritus of the National Institute of Neurosurgery in Budapest, Hungary. When he was director (1973-1993), the institute included a 150-bed free-standing neurosurgery hospital, at that time the third largest neurosurgery unit in the world. It was, according to an American medical colleague, “a world-class neurosurgery institute”, where “surgical excellence and superb patient care were the hallmark[s]”. Dr. Pasztor “was a leader with courage, vision and high personal competence” in his field. “That he did this in ‘socialist times’ is remarkable. Emil was/is a leader in the world of neurosurgery. I place him in the top five of all the medical academics I have met in my long career”. (Dr. Frederick Holmes, professor emeritus, University of Kansas Medical Center, principal investigator, USAID Pediatric Oncology Outreach to Hungary, 1991-1998)

Emil Pasztor was the son of a baker who had opened his own bakery just in time for the 1929 crash to wipe him out. However, by 1939 he had made enough money to open another. Dr. Pasztor describes his education, first in a suburb of Budapest and then in Budapest during World War II, the siege of Budapest in 1944, his capture by the Russians and lucky escape, his work as a laborer and subsequent medical education and early career as a neurosurgeon, and the 1956 revolution. He relates his and his wife’s decision to remain in Hungary after the revolution was crushed, and his subsequent career including trips to medical conferences. He makes many comments about the changes in life after the collapse of Communism in 1989.

- Thomas: This is Major Thomas, and I am at the National Institute of Neurosurgery at Amerikai ut 57, 1145 Budapest, Hungary, and I am interviewing Dr. Emil Pasztor, We will begin if we may, Dr. Pasztor, by asking you when and where you were born and a little bit about your family.
- Pasztor: I was born in 1926, the 18th of April, in Budapest. My father at that time worked as a bakery worker, and very soon, in '29 I think, he opened his own bakery in the Buda district. He wanted to create such a financial situation for his family, that his sons would get good and higher education. My younger brother was born in '28. But in '29 or '30 came the international bank crash. You know about this?
- Thomas: The crash? Yes.
- Pasztor: And everything went away. Our father was working again as a bakery worker. He was a good specialist, working always as a top man in big bakeries, collecting enough money to open again his bakery in '39 in Pestszentimre, the nearest village to Budapest, today the 18th district of Budapest. Our family had lived there for some time past because at the age of 5 I have had a chronic inflammation of the eye. The doctor's advice was to bring the boy from Budapest to another place, where the air is more convenient for him. So we moved to Pestszentimre in '31 and my parents lived there till the end of their life, but myself only till '45, the end of World War II. I was happy because my parents had a nice and long life, till they were 93 and 92. We had many a laugh over the story, when my mother explained the one year difference between their ages. It was really one month: from December till January next year.
- Thomas: And where did you go to school?
- Pasztor: Elementary school four years in Pestszentimre., and then high school (we call it gymnasium) eight years.
- Thomas: Yes, but where was the gymnasium?
- Pasztor: In Budapest.
- Thomas: Not in Pestszentimre?
- Pasztor: No, no, Pestszentimre was too small a place to have a high school. We traveled by outskirt train every morning to Budapest and back in the afternoon. The Saint Ladislaw high school was a famous one, in the 10th district of Budapest. Also today, sixty years later, I am very grateful for their severity and high standard.
- Thomas: This is in the '30's, this is not after the war.

- Pasztor: No, no. I finished high school in 1944 and got high school graduation.
- Thomas: And then what did you do?
- Pasztor: Then in September 1944 I went to the Medical Branch of the Pazmany Peter University in Budapest. The semester was short, lasted only till Christmas. At that time the Soviet Army surrounded Budapest, the war reached our capital.
- Thomas: The Russians came into Budapest. The Nazis were in Budapest, yes.
- Pasztor: The Russians besieged our capital city from house to house. It was told that the Russians demanded an unconditional surrender, but the German and the Hungarian soldiers, who hold the city, did not give it. Then started the battle from house to house. And we civilian people were living in the cellars. We were short of food, water, fuel and electricity.
- Thomas: Were you living in the cellars for a long time?
- Pasztor: For about six weeks. In that part of Budapest, where we were living, we came out from the cellar about the end of January, but the end of the battle for Budapest was around the 13th of February, as I remember. The last days of the siege were in the Buda castle, fighting the Russians only against the Germans. The whole city, mostly Buda and the castle region, were in total ruins. Have you not seen the ruins of this from pictures?
- Thomas: I have seen pictures of the ruins and the ruins of the bridges.
- Pasztor: Yes. As I mentioned we were able to come out of the cellar about the last days of January 1945. But one day coming out to the fresh air a Russian soldier came to me on the street saying roughly, "Come with me for a little work!" He took me into a ruined shop, where that time some civilian Hungarians were already collected. Slowly our number increased and at the evening the room was full with "prisoners". We had to spend the night there and the next morning they formed a marching column from people collected from different parts of the city. Later on that day the column of the "prisoners" (thousands of civilians) became so enormous that I, as a member of this column, was not able to realize the forefront and the end of the column, we were eight or ten in one row and we marched to the south. At the evening they pushed us into a church where we spent the night on the ground. The next morning we continued our trip in the direction of south, with the final target: Siberia---do you know the situation? you heard about it, no? you know what I am saying?--they collected civilians from the streets because, I think, they reported to their superior authorities much more Hungarian soldier prisoners than the reality was. They had to complete the number of prisoners with such a method: to capture civilian people. But the next morning was the luckiest day in my life. Going through a village one of the Russian armed guards caught a glimpse of my nice shoes and called me out from the column "Come out, come out!" and

we went to a peasant's garden, into the stable. "Change the shoes!" he told me and I had to take off mine and put on his. Luckily his shoes were too small for me. I attempted repeatedly and probably unconsciously this maneuver lasted longer than was necessary. He lost his patience, said "Oh!" and left me alone.

Thomas: And he had your shoes.

Pasztor: Yes. But I had my life.

Thomas: That's right!

Pasztor: Because most of the people having been with me in the column came back from the Siberian working camps only five or six years later and many of them died. I stayed there in the stable half or one hour more and when I came out I was free. And happy. A small Russian horse carriage came on the road and I asked the old soldier who was alone to bring me to Budapest. He did it with pleasure. Today I think it was an irresponsibility, but as a young boy I wanted to get some compensation for my two days' captivity. The luckiest day of my life.

Thomas: Yes, yes. (short silence) Could you then when you came back to Budapest continue to school, to the university?

Pasztor: Only later on. It was only the end of January, still about two weeks till the end of the siege of Budapest. My parents were very, very happy when I turned up. They did not know what happened when I disappeared for three days.

Thomas: They must have been very worried.

Pasztor: Yes. Next morning my mother and my sister-in-law, who was working in the Railway Hospital, brought a paper in Hungarian and Russian text, that I am working in the hospital. We went to the hospital, but when I saw a Russian soldier on the street I ran away, I did not want to prove this whether it is a good document or not. That time these documents meant nothing at all. So we went to the hospital and I met the nephew of the chief nun. All assistants and nurses, all workers in the hospital were nuns. What is the name of the chief nun?

Thomas: Mother Superior.

Pasztor: Mother Superior, yes. With her nephew, the same age as me, we worked together in the hospital as unskilled workers, for which we got food and a resting place in the cellar. The Railway Hospital is to be found in the near vicinity of one of the greatest railway stations in Budapest, the Western Station, which was in ruins at the end of the battles for the city. The building of the hospital remained intact on the whole, but all the windows were broken. Soon the hospital got glass, and the boy and I became glazers, we put glass in

all the windows of the hospital. One part of the hospital functions today in its old appearance with my window glass. Sometimes I tell the doctors and directors, with whom I have good contact, "You see, these windows were glazed by me in March and early April 1945". And it is still here today.

Thomas: Did that make you want to become a glazer?

Pasztor: No. As I mentioned, I became a student and continued my studies when the university started again at the 15th of April 1945.

Thomas: And it was a medical university.

Pasztor: Yes.

Thomas: So you knew you wanted to be a doctor.

Pasztor: Yes.

Thomas: When did you first know you wanted to be a doctor?

Pasztor: At my age of 16, at the sixth year of the high school (in the high school we learned eight years of Latin, six years of German, and four years Italian or French), I decided to be a doctor. My father was on my side, but my mother wanted me to be a Lutheran priest. All members of the family were Lutheran.

Thomas: But you wanted to be a doctor.

Pasztor: Yes. I continued my studies at the university and in 1950 I got my M.D. diplom. But earlier, as a student, I started to work in the university neurological clinic, in the histological (pathological) laboratory. That time, in 1949 at the neurological clinic was organized the first neurosurgical department in Budapest, with 50 beds, under the leadership of Laszlo Zoltan, M.D., Ph.D.

Thomas: That's a big department.

Pasztor: Yes, but very soon it was not big enough and the health authorities wanted to establish a bigger institute. Looking for the possibilities they found this beautiful building, which was built in 1906-1909 by the famous architect Bela Lajta in an art nouveau style. Originally it was a Jewish hospital and old age home and was nationalized in 1950. We got this empty building in 1953 and in 1954 after some internal reconstruction we started the work here as the National Institute of Neurosurgery.

Thomas: Let me ask you, when you continued your medical university studies in April, was there any change in what you studied and how under the Communist

regime as before, was there any difference in the subjects you studied, in the laboratory work, in anything that you did?

Pasztor: I think no. At the end of the war in 1945 it was a republican form of government with several parties in Parliament. The Communist regime started from '49-'50. The university teaching program did not change, later a new subject, a philosophy subject, was connected to the program, which was mandatory.

Thomas: And you graduated from medical school in what year?

Pasztor: In 1950, at the sixth year of my university studies.

Thomas: Tell me what happened to you in 1956.

Pasztor: I have to start the story a little earlier. In 1950 I became a co-worker of the Neurosurgical Department and from 1954 in the Neurosurgical Institute. But in 1949 happened something very important event in my life. I met a young beautiful girl and within a month in June 1949 we married, it was 54 years ago and till now we are living together.

Thomas: That's wonderful!

Pasztor: In the beginning we lived in the clinic, and from '55 in our own first flat in the 8th district of Budapest, near to an important telephone center, in Rigo (thrush) Street. On the 23rd OF October, 1956, in the morning I went to the Hungarian Akademy of Sciences to give a small lecture. So I was not on the streets till the later afternoon, not knowing what happened there. My wife was at home. In the afternoon a good friend of mine, a schoolmate from high school, who became an engineer and because of his bad financial situation (an ill wife and two children) he had to have a second job at the Technical University, called my wife Esther and asked, "What are you reading"? and she said, "I am alone and I am as always reading" and "What are you reading?" and she said as I heard it later, "I am reading Seneca". "You are reading Seneca when a revolution is starting?". And she asked, "What does it mean, revolution?" "You know, from our university thousands and thousands of students and we teachers are going in the direction of the Parliament, of the Petofi statue and of the Bem Square, and there is a freedom in the air, people are laughing and singing. Can you imagine? Where is Emil?" "Emil is in the Akademy but he will be at home soon, I think". At 5 or 6 p.m. the whole city was moving. Then he came to us and we were together in the evening speaking about the possible changes in our life. In the evening at 7 or 8 a speech given by Erno Gero was broadcast on the radio. Gero was the second after Rakosi in the Communist hierarchy.

The speech was very drastic, full of unpleasant things, saying what will happen if it goes on further.

- Thomas: Was he threatening?
- Pasztor: Yes, very much. And then we heard some shots fired, I said that oh it's joking, some children. But my friend said noi, no, I saw the situation on the streets, it may be that something starts again, a real revolution. The he said good-bye to us around 9 and went on. Next day he told us he was not able to go further, he was staying just before the house, because in that part of the city, near to the telephone and the radio centers, the situation was dangerous.
- Thomas: He couldn't go home.
- Pasztor: He couldn't go home, only two hours later. And for some days the traffic was very bad.
- Thomas: But you could walk to the institute.
- Pasztor: Yes, some days later.
- Thomas: But not in the first days?
- Pasztor: Not in the first days.
- Thomas: Not on the 24th or 25th.
- Pasztor: Then it was a little easier and we thought it will start a new life. But then from the 3rd or 4th of November the Russian occupation of our country started and the situation became very dangerous, again we were not able to come out to the street.
- Thomas: You had to stay in your apartment.
- Pasztor: In the cellar. Again in the cellar.
- Thomas: Back in the cellar.
- Pasztor: Back in the cellar. We were in danger not only on the streets because of the firing of tanks, guns and small arms, but also in the flats from the splinters breaking in through the windows. After a week in the cellar we came up. Some weeks later my friend came and told me that with the help of some underground organizations there are possibilities to leave the country, to go abroad illegally. Thousands and thousands of people were going (at the end there were about two hundred thousands), and we must go with them. "I arranged things also for you, if you want, it is up to you only", he said. My wife and I stand before the most difficult and most responsible decision of our life. What to do? Stay or go? We decided not to go. We had just started our careers, Esther got her medical diplom in 1955 and started her study of psychiatry in the National Institute of Neurology and psychiatry. We

remained, because we wanted to serve our nation. I think we chose the hardest task.

Thomas: Your wife is a doctor too, she is a psychiatrist, yes?

Pasztor: As I told you, she got her M.D. diplom in 1955.

Thomas: Right before '56.

Pasztor: Yes, and after 4 years of study in NINP she became a specialist, psychiatrist. She was working 8 years there and later in the Railway Hospital till her retirement.

(break in tape)

Pasztor: In 1961 I sent a paper to the World Congress of Neurosurgery in Washington and it was accepted for oral presentation. I got an air ticket from Eszter's aunt from Yugoslavia and the permission from the Hungarian authorities to exchange only 5 US dollars. I was young and enthusiastic, and was delighted to get the possibility to take part in the World Congress and get acquainted with the work of the American colleagues. So I set out for America with \$5 in my pocket. Arriving in Washington I went to the YMCA for \$1 per night. Next morning I went to the basement for a ten cents' breakfast from a machine. I put the ten cents coin in, but suddenly I did not know what to do, to push, to pull or to press, with hand or with foot. Anyhow I found a sandwich. I ate this small piece and thought that it was always my feeling that as a surgeon, I have a good sense for technical things, anyhow in that moment I did not know what to do. Who knows, maybe there was somebody here earlier who did not know what to do. So I tried all the high-priced machines and one of them opened with a 50 cents food. In the end I arrived at the congress but two days late. The president of the congress, Professor Paul Bucy, the world famous neurosurgeon, welcomed me with pleasure: "You arrived! My God! You came from Hungary! It's impossible! Your lecture would have been yesterday, but you will give it tomorrow." I did it with success. Later on I got money from Esther's relatives and was able to spend some days in the States after the congress. As I told you I did not get any financial help from the Hungarian authorities, though they accepted the importance of the congress.

Thomas: They let you have a passport then.

Pasztor: Yes. For example, later, in 1977, it was a similar case. The World Congress of Neurosurgery was organized in Sao Paulo, Brazil. I asked the Ministry of Health to send me to the congress as the director of our National Institute of Neurosurgery. (This position, the directorship of a national institute, is a high one and later, in 1979, I was elected correspondent and in 1987 ordinary member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.) At that time our wages were

low, by all means not enough for such a trip, and we did not have western currency. The minister was a nice man, only some years older than me, I knew him earlier, and he said, "I am very sorry, we are unable to send you, we have no money for it." This was the restriction point.

Thomas: Was that true? They didn't have the money?

Pasztor: What to say? I sent a telegram to Sao Paulo to the congress that I will not be able to take part at the congress for financial problems. Some days later I got the air ticket and the hotel reservation in Sao Paulo by the Brazilian Neurosurgical Society. People love me somehow. Many times I was asked to go to meetings and congresses and they paid everything. In the early '80's a lot of Japanese groups, neurosurgeons, came here to our institute to make a study of our work, and a good contact and friendship developed among us. The leading senior neurosurgeon in Japan was Keiji Sano, professor of the Tokyo University, who also visited us and we became good friends. Do you know, the Tokyo University is the top, the first one among the about 90 universities in Tokyo, where also the most famous professor, who for example got the Nobel prize a day earlier, had to retire at age 60. It was a big celebration in Tokyo when Professor Sano retired, and they invited 8 foreigners, leading neurosurgeons with their wives. They were 2 Americans, 2 Canadians, English, French, German, and myself.

Thomas: This was what year?

Pasztor: It was in '81. The invitation lasted generally for three days, but Esther and I got further invitations to different places in Japan for another two weeks. Wonderful friendship!

Thomas: Did anything change after the Communist regime collapsed? When there ceased to be Communism?

Pasztor: In 1990?

Thomas: Yes. Did the situation for you change with regard to something like that? Would the Hungarian government pay for you to go? Or was it easier to get a passport? Or did anything change?

Pasztor: The passport problem disappeared, absolutely disappeared, everybody gets a passport. Hard to send me abroad, it's a question I cannot answer very well, exactly, because three years later I gave up the directory of this institute, '93. Then later on I didn't ask and I know the answer today, Hungary has no money, not enough. Every year, at the end of the year, I get, as a member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, a letter from the president of the medical department of the academy. The academy has 11 departments, like language and literature, history, mathematics, physics, technical, biology, agrarian, medical and so on. In the medical department of the academy we are 30

members, correspondent and ordinary members together. Last week I got such a letter: "If you want to go next year abroad for a scientific meeting or congress and if you want to get some help for traveling, leave your address for it." The help may be an air ticket, or maybe a registration fee of the congress, or to meet hotel expenses, but usually one of them, not all. We have only a very limited amount of money for it. I don't want to say how much money the medical department has for this purpose because you start to laugh and you will not be able to finish this discussion.

- Thomas: But does this seem like at least a small change from the way it was under Kadar?
- Pasztor: The change is enormous. Theoretically. Practically, the financial situation is for us not so bad, but there are a lot of people who get minimal fees, which is now 50,000 forints for a month (today, approximately 210 forints equal 1 U.S. dollar).
- Thomas: So it has changed but not completely, or not enough maybe.
- Pasztor: Not enough because the country was a poor country, but sorry, also today it is a poor country. The 13 years' change is not enough to get to the level of what we lost in 40 years. In these years we have had to change the whole economy, but the productivity is till now very low. Why is it that the productivity in the U.S.A. is 5 or 8 times more than here? It is not easy to answer these questions, but probably the most important is that we suffered half a century of losses in the development of the economy and society.
- Thomas: Do you think people miss, Hungarians miss certain things about Communism?
- Pasztor: Miss?
- Thomas: They wish they still had Communism?
- Pasztor: No.
- Thomas: Or some things about Communism, like free schools, I don't know what.
- Pasztor: It is not so easy to say, you know, because free schools did not exist.
- Thomas: Not now, but under Communism weren't the schools free?
- Pasztor: Yes, but you paid for it in another way which you did not know. You had free schools but you had small wages, ridiculous wages, comparing to western countries. Tell me please, what is better for you, to have free schools and no wages, or wages and you pay the schools.

- Thomas: I see. So you don't think people miss Communism, wish they still had Communism?
- Pasztor: I don't think people miss Communism. Maybe that theoretically they think that.....
- Thomas: It was better then.
- Pasztor: Not better. I think that about a hundred or two hundred years from now the world will be rich enough. Theoretically some historians say that for a real Communism the countries and the single people, the whole society must be rich materially, and more educated, having a higher ethical standard. When there are no poor people on the streets then maybe the feeling that you can have in freedom will come, some hundred years.
- Thomas: But do you have more freedom of speech now personally and freedom of speech in the press?
- Pasztor: Yes. There is no question.
- Thomas: That is different from under Communism?
- Pasztor: Yes, yes, such a big difference that you can not speak about this. There is no problem now, to speak.
- Thomas: That is true in the press too? Newspapers, magazines.....
- Pasztor: I think that the newspapers, magazines, write what they want.
- Thomas: They don't write what the government tells them to.
- Pasztor: No. Every newspaper writes what a party says to them.
- Thomas: Now?
- Pasztor: Everywhere. Somebody influences the media, no?
- Thomas: Yes, but is it the Communist party that always influences?
- Pasztor: Why? Why the Communist Party/
- Thomas: I am asking you, is that true now, the Communist Party?
- Pasztor: It was never true that the Communist Party is the only one that influences the media. Every party has influenced the media from his own side. And if they don't influence the media then the newspaper writers from their own head influence what they are writing. So everybody is influenced by someone,

maybe himself. But now you cannot compare what is today and what was 20 years ago.

Thomas: It is very different?

Pasztor: Absolutely different.

Thomas: Thank you, Dr. Pasztor. I know you must go. Thank you so much.