

An Interview with Marta Siklos

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

Interviews conducted by  
Virginia Major Thomas  
in 2009

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Family background and education—teaching English and being a translator under Communism—life under the Communist regime—travel—the political changes—the Hungarian political and social situation today

**Biography**

Marta Siklos came from a Hungarian-Jewish family and became a secondary school English teacher and a translator of English language literature. As a teenager she visited family in England and later had both teacher training and a teaching job in the United States. She experienced the political changes in Hungary as a gradual relaxation but was still surprised by their extent. She comments at length on the euphoria after the Communist collapse and the subsequent divisiveness which developed in the country. She discusses many of the political and social problems in today's Hungary.

- Thomas: This is Major Thomas on November 19, 2009, at Csorsz utca 5 in Budapest, Hungary, and I'm interviewing Marta Siklos, and we'll just begin by asking you, Marta, where and when you were born and a little bit about your family.
- Siklos: Well, I was born in 1952 [June 4], and as to my family, I'm from a Hungarian Jewish family, so in my family's history, being Jewish is quite important. My mother was actually director of technology with one of the best and most famous liquor factories in Budapest after the war, which actually became the Zwack factory now, Unicum, that's right. And my father was basically a tradesman . Anyway, neither of them had a university education.
- Thomas: Were they not allowed to have [a university education] ?
- Siklos: Well, probably with my mother, who was a very very talented girl, she should have gone to the university, but it was the 1930's, obviously not a good time and her family was not in a very good social or financial position, so basically she never studied. And with my father... I really never asked him why! It was a middle class family.
- Thomas: Did you have brothers and sisters?
- Siklos: I do have a sister, she is younger than I am, actually, I wonder if I can call her a victim of the, a future victim of the Holocaust... she has serious problems with her mental health so practically she has never worked all her life. But there she is, I keep contact with her, I'm the one who more or less takes care of her.
- Thomas: Where did you go to school, in Budapest?
- Siklos: In Budapest. We spent some time in Kecskemet, part of the reason was that my mother... I'm not saying grew up, but used to work in Kecskemet before the war, and the other thing is that in those days you were placed wherever you were needed, so actually my mother got this job in Kecskemet.
- Thomas: You were placed by the state?
- Siklos: Yes, placed by the state. There were other, family reasons, but when my sister was born, after that we moved to Kecskemet and since my mother's health was also rather poor, she had problems with her heart, and she had two children, actually the doctors advised her that she shouldn't, she would not be able to basically maintain care of two children, so her only surviving sister came to live with us. And it was kind of an extended family, I had no grandmother, no grandparents, they died during the war or before it.
- Thomas: Were they killed in the camps?

- Siklos: Or on the way to the camps. Anyhow, my sister and I, were brought up by my parents but my aunt as I said lived with us so they were in a way grandparents.. well I thought I should mention that about my family.
- Thomas: And you went to the university here in Budapest?
- Siklos: Yes
- Thomas: And you didn't have any problems, coming from a middle class family?
- Siklos: No, it was already 1970, there were no such problems in those days. The only problem was there were very few university places, so you really had to perform well, have a little contact and I guess I was really on the border of it but I performed pretty well and my mother did have some contact, but actually I studied the first year in Debrecen and after a year I was able to go on studying in Budapest.
- Thomas: And what did you study?
- Siklos: English and Hungarian languages.
- Thomas: And did you learn to speak English at that time? I think not, you must have learned English earlier.
- Siklos: High school, I started to learn English in high school, when I was 14.
- Thomas: Was it general at that time that they offered English in high school?
- Siklos: No. But it was just the start of those times when it became more and more widespread, and in my teaching career I think I could say that I was very lucky to have chosen English, because in those days teaching English was not just teaching English but it was about having a different attitude to teaching, to education... students were more than welcoming to the idea of being able to learn English, so it was a good experience for me.
- It still is, but in those days it had some added significance, it was not just a subject.
- Thomas: When you were in school, I assume that you studied Marxism-Leninism, and when was that, in high school?
- Siklos: No, well in high school yes, not necessarily a subject like Marxism or Leninism but we obviously studied basically in the spirit of Marxism. I mean, there were some wonderful teachers, but I did not have the best ones, so I keep saying that my sense of history developed pretty late on account of the horrible teachers of Marxist history. I'm not against Marxist theory, I'm just

against the way they did it. And there were other, really good examples, but I just didn't like those teachers.

Thomas: Did they teach other philosophies or approaches to history as options, that is, you could take the Marxist or you could take another philosophy of history?

Siklos: Not in the high school. At the university you did start reading about existentialism, for instance... I actually remember ...not necessarily philosophy but other approaches... structuralism, and when I was at the university these things were not just kicking in but they were practically breaking into the educational systems.

Thomas: They were presented in the curriculum.

Siklos: It depended on the teacher or the professor you went

Thomas: What years were you at the university?

Siklos: 1970 to 1975. It was more open then. For instance, one of our best teachers, a professor of Hungarian literature, was somebody who was in prison after '56 and was not allowed to teach for a long time, and when I was at the university he was giving a course and students were swarming to his class. I think it was a fortunate period, an exciting period.

Thomas: Since you were born in '52, I suppose you don't have memories of the revolution?

Siklos: No, we were in Kecskemet. Actually my only memory, probably my very first memory in life...at least I might have had some others but...was that we are in Kecskemet, it was November, and I could see that my parents were crying and that was because their surviving brother had just emigrated to the United States or anyway had left the country, emigrated, and I didn't understand why they were crying. They were by the fireplace and it was winter r, and that's what I remember. I know now that they had been debating whether to go or not in 1956 and actually they decided to stay. My mother was such a wonderful expert, plus she had a gift for languages, she spoke German, a little English, Russian, French and she picked it up practically by herself, anyway she could have made a careere in another country, I'm sure she could have, but they did not have the courage or they had too much of an experience in being forced to move, but they stayed. I don't think they regretted it, though.

Thomas: So when you got out of the university, what happened then?

Siklos: Well, I had a baby. I got married at the end of my 4<sup>th</sup> year, he was an engineer. I finished the university in June, I had my first baby in October, and then I had my second in 1977, and sadly enough I didn't stay with them too long and in 1977 in December I started to teach. The first year I actually taught in a

primary school, I really don't know why I was so worried that I would never get the job.. Aactually it was a very good primary school, with a wonderful headmaster, in Budapest, which is now an evangelic school of 12 years, anyway, it was one of those schools with a liberal trend, it had a lot of teachers who were trained for high school teaching, not primary school teaching. Actually he arranged it for me to get into a high school. Well, I mean I think he liked me but he saw that a primary school was not for me. That's how I got to one of the best gymnasiums in Budapest, in 1979, it was the Berzsenyi high school [spells the name].

- Thomas: And what did you teach there? Did you teach English?
- Siklos: Yes, and Hungarian, mostly English. For a long time I didn't teach Hungarian literature, well, actually I didn't do much of it, it's a lot of work. [I taught] both language and literature.
- Thomas: What did you teach in English literature?
- Siklos: It's a good thing you ask, because in an English class you were not supposed to teach literature. But since I do love literature... , I'm actually a translator, I translate books... in my English classes I actually did do some poems and short stories, but it was entirely up to me. In general, when I speak about how English was taught, you were given really a free hand in what to do, you decided what books to use---there was the final exam and obviously you had to teach the present perfect ...but other than that, what I did, what material I used,... obviously there were fewer in those days, you couldn't get so many books and newspapers, but the books themselves were messengers of other winds in education, new views in education.
- Thomas: And the literature you taught, was it English, American, 20<sup>th</sup> century or earlier?
- Siklos: Mostly modern, 20<sup>th</sup> century, English and American, , it was really my taste, not every day or every week but from time to time. Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, Eliot... .
- Thomas: And for the students were those books, say, Sylvia Plath's poems, were they available for them to read or did you produce, let's say, the poems? I wonder if they were even available.
- Siklos: I did produce the poems. Well, you could have bought some of the books but... First of all, for like 5 poems a year you don't buy a book. Secondly, English books were very very expensive, you had to go to the foreign language book store, and they were much more expensive than Hungarian books.

- Thomas: They were published in England and America, not in Hungary, that's why they were expensive?
- Siklos: That's right. They were available in some stores, not many. There was a foreign language book shop in Vaci utca, or you could go to the British library in the British embassy, it was one of the sources.
- Thomas: I have heard, but I'm not sure now about the years, that there were book stores that had all kinds of 20<sup>th</sup> century British and American literature but it was on shelves that were accessible only to some people, not just anybody. That may have been in the '60's.
- Siklos: It's possible. But the embassy library was a good source and it was all right to go there. It was the British Council ... quite an educational feature on the part of the embassy. Plus, in those days, in the '70's and early '80's, there were these teacher training courses held first in Hungary, in country towns, in Veszprem, Pecs, and others, and the English teachers went there, it was quite a closed clique in those days, there were not many English teachers those days, and then came our instructors mostly from Britain, and they had a lot of material. The teacher training courses were special courses organized by the ministry of education, they were summer courses for high school teachers already teaching.
- Thomas: It sounds as if you didn't find the government very repressive at this time as far as your profession was concerned.
- Siklos: That's true. The school itself was one where there were a lot of liberal-minded teachers. My principal was not one of them, but he was a very good man, I don't think he made life very easy for the liberal-minded teachers, he drew some limits, but he didn't make it difficult, either, he knew their value. It was a very good school. It is interesting, I spoke about this principal recently with an ex-colleague of mine and she said that in retrospect she appreciated him much better than she did at the time.
- Thomas: And how was life, aside from teaching, then? Did you find there were restrictions in what you could say, what you could do, going out of the country or whatever?
- Siklos: Traveling was obviously one of the main issues where people felt that they were not free. That was one of the most important restrictions. You could only travel every 3 years, only if you were invited. Actually I was 16 when I first traveled to a foreign country, my uncles lived in Manchester and sent me a letter of invitation so I spent like 6 weeks with them, it was in '68. There were many people who were not allowed even if they had an invitation, but that's something I don't know much about. So this was one thing. As to what we should or should not say, I don't think I felt any of that at all. This was partly because with your friends you felt free to speak about anything at all, but the

other thing is that for a very long time I was not a very great critic of the regime. I, we, the family practically went along with the idea that socialism isn't their big faith, but all in all it gives people equal opportunities, it gives people opportunities to work, opportunities to study, opportunities to have a home even if it was not your own home. There were restrictions but they were sort of minor restrictions. And ... as to opinions ... I don't think I was terribly cautious about airing my opinions, which were not of big value anyway.

Thomas: But you didn't feel you had to be very careful of what you said in the classroom.

Siklos: No, but there were all those things... like at the university, you heard the rumors about who could be an informer, because it was more or less known there were students who were kind of informers and

#### INTERRUPTION

Thomas: Did you actually know who were informers so you were careful not to talk around them?

Siklos: I think we did have an idea, and we were careful, we didn't like the person anyway, so it was not difficult to resist [talking to them]. In the school you also had the people who you found it better not to talk with, not so much... you didn't care to, you didn't have the inclination.

Thomas: I have heard people say they knew who they could talk freely around, and around whom you could not be candid.

Siklos: Yes, I think that was the case. In terms of restrictions, the restrictions came for us a little later but this was more when my husband started his own business. This was quite early, 1980, very very early, and it was for basically financial reasons... he thought that he wanted to provide for his family, he was an engineer... I don't know whether he had made the right choice, but anyway he left his job as an engineer, so he became his own man and restrictions were simple like not having a telephone, imagine starting a business without having a telephone! Bank loans... no such thing, you just didn't dream about such things. Food, no restrictions, I mean we had things to eat, we did not have avocado, but well, you never knew there was avocado. No imported food.

Thomas: Tell me about your first visit abroad, you said you were 16 and you went to Manchester. Do you remember any particular impressions you had, differences between life in Manchester and life in Hungary, because you were in a family in Manchester, weren't you?

Siklos: It was actually very interesting ... Well, I was invited by my uncles, two bachelors, basically, very nice people, but what I experienced with them was actually that they were rather, not orthodox, but rather religious Jews, so it

was not what I would call the big western real world, so that was not it. What was interesting is that they found a place for me where I could stay in London, and there I actually got acquainted with a new person who was like 10 years older than me and we are still good friends. She is English but she was born in South Africa. A brilliant-minded lady. So it was this woman that taught me about ... partly about the real middle class way of life, suburban way of life, and partly about a very liberal-minded intellectual kind of mindset, in London. But maybe what might be of interest is that I was to spend two weeks in a Jewish camp so that I would meet people of my age. There was a Czech girl there, and that's when the Prague Spring happened, and I remember the girl being upset and frustrated and I know that I did not understand at the time what it was all about. She was visiting, just like me, she was a little younger but in some ways she was more mature because she knew what to cry for.

- Thomas: I had somebody tell me that when they went to London it was as if they went to a city which had never been through wars because it had been repaired and the castle in Budapest was at that time still in ruins.
- Siklos: What I loved most was how wonderfully well-kept everything was, but actually my most important experience was ... it was the first time when I was by myself, and my friend, the English woman, gave me all sorts of ideas of what to see to see in London and I was just on my own walking alone in the British Museum and the National Gallery, and that was really a liberating, beautiful feeling.
- Thomas: Did you have any particular sense of the differences, the difference in architecture or difference in the way things were kept up, or.....?
- Siklos: The way things were kept and the rather... the grandiosity of the architecture when you talk about London.
- Thomas: Budapest is pretty grand too.
- Siklos: Yes, but it didn't appear to be grand in those days. Or I never actually took a look! You don't take a look at the area around you.
- Thomas: One person told me that she couldn't get over how clean the countryside was and the cities too, because here under the Communist regime the Communists were left to take care of everything, only they didn't. Did you have that experience? In other words, it wasn't cleaned up as much here as it should have been because people expected the state, the government to do it so they didn't clean up themselves except their own little yards or their own houses.
- Siklos: I think I could go along with that view. Again, looking back, it's the light. Everything was dark in those days, like you were walking in the street in a poorly-lit city, here, not in England.

- Thomas: [Comparison of well-lit Paris with poorly-lit Budapest] Would you like to say anything more about the Kadar period? about the changes?
- Siklos: It was a very very gradual easing up and you did feel it, especially with my husband having his successes in business. We did not become rich but we were living more and more, if not affluently, more easily —maybe something I could tell you, probably, is that we made the mistake of not being bourgeois enough in our financial philosophy. My mother-in-law ... you know we lived with her after her husband died, my husband had some good years when there was money to save, his business was reinforced plastics, that's what he started to do... now he doesn't do that anymore ... so she said invest, invest, buy, buy, buy apartments, and we didn't, why would we buy another apartment or another empty lot...?. I think I should tell you this, too ... I had the opportunity to go to Britain for a teacher training course,, and then also to America, ... it was before the changes. So... I have an uncle, the same uncle I was talking about, who lives in Los Angeles, and we went to the States, and then visited him after this course, anyhow... after we returned home, and this was still before the changes, we actually decided to emigrate, to leave the country, and we tried making arrangements, even tried selling our apartment, and then we just said we have family here and everything and decided against it. That was already at the very end of the regime when it was possible to have your apartment and to sell it but we were feeling very uneasy about what to say to whom when we sell it because... , well, so that nobody would suspect we wanted to leave the country, that's why we are selling. We were really thinking about moving, absolutely, very seriously.
- Thomas: You hadn't actually been there yet?
- Siklos: No. So we visited my uncle and after coming back we said well, we like the idea of changing . We had seen the States, I received the Soros grant through teaching, it was a 5-week course at Brown University in Rhode Island for high school teachers, and that's when we had the opportunity to visit my uncle, and my husband was also able to get a visa. And then it gave us the impetus, that opportunities are here, but then we didn't go. I think this was 1987. It was already toward the end but you still had to be careful.
- Thomas: Was that the time when you could only go places every 3 years?
- Siklos: I think in those days it was a little easier. But there was no way to get the currency. So if you wanted to, you could take a tour, a package tour, with a travel agent, and you could go every year in the last years, but not just hop on a train or take your car.
- Thomas: So Soros was sponsoring Hungarian students at Brown. What kind of a course was it?

- Siklos: It was a teacher training course, there was another in Pennsylvania, with 10 or 20 teachers. It was not terribly good as a course but it was a wonderful experience to see the States. They were certainly not as good in teacher training as the English were, but they taught a lot about the American culture and that was good.
- Thomas: When your husband was an engineer, was the situation such that it was necessary for people to have two jobs, or could you even have two jobs?
- Siklos: You could, but he didn't want that. That's why he decided that he would quit his job. It was quite a good engineering company that he worked for, and he had studied computer science at the university and he wanted to persuade the management to invest in computers, because he thought that was the future, and they were very reluctant, and he got so cross... that was part of the reason he left his job. Yes, it was quite early, it was around 1980. It was a risky decision, it was also, because, okay, he made more money than he would have as an engineer, but it was hard... difficult work as it is because that's how he started, he took the brush and the resin, he worked with it, he was never shy of working with his two hands, which is just fine, but... there are limits.
- Thomas: And what about you? Was teaching adequately paid?
- Siklos: No, but we had a lot of opportunity, there were a lot of foreign language schools, they were just starting, so I actually gave extra classes, that was my second job, I did a second job, but I was also teaching. So I earned quite a lot. It was nice having my mother-in-law, she could help out with the kids.
- Thomas: I had one man tell me he taught but he wrote as an extra job, but of course what's going to be published is limited. Did you do that, or do translation?
- Siklos: I actually started translating in the '80's. I translate literature, fiction, mostly 20<sup>th</sup> century, American and English, not all of high literary value. Some good. I translated J. McInerney's "Bright Lights, Big City, for example. I like doing it. I do it mostly in the summer, which is actually quite a good way and that's how I like doing it, in the winter I teach and then comes the summer break, that's three months. When we went to Lake Balaton with all the kids and their cousins, and I was sitting by the lake and scribbling by hand for the first two books and after the second book my husband said no, we are going to buy a computer.
- Thomas: So you had a computer in the '80's because your husband was far-sighted! So what happened when the changes happened? What happened to you? Did you see it coming?
- Siklos: Well, no, as I said, everything was kind of smooth and gradual. When it actually happened, there were some dramatic moments of the changes like the reburial of Imre Nagy, we watched it here on television. You kept hearing

about the opposition movement, some of my colleagues had been active in the SZETA ovement, that was an opposition movement that had close ties to the Polish underground [spells SZETA]. It's an abbreviation but don't ask me for what right now. You kept getting books about 1956, which were samizdat editions.

Thomas: Were you active in any resistance?

Siklos: No. I was not in the Communist party, but my husband was. In fact, he was one of those members who became a member because he thought that he could change the party. He kept saying if you want to make a reform, if you want to make changes, then you have to be there, which was kind of an illusion. But that's what was driving him. He was not a member for a while, he became a member... like in the last year of his job with the engineering company, 1979, so then he was in employment, and they appreciated him a lot and he just found he would have more say if he was a member. But then of course after the changes.... I had very good friends who weren't active resistance members but knew a little more about what was happening.

Thomas: So in a way you were not surprised because things had been changing gradually?

Siklos: No, but I was still surprised—it was really euphoric, it was a very very happy time, it was a beautiful few years, even the year when the far right came to the surface and we had these demonstrations and it was a wonderful feeling to see and hear the crowds, we went out into the streets to demonstrate, that's all I did, anyway, but you did feel the strength of the community, of new ways, you said, okay, we are going to make a better country. But .. well, that was another period.

Thomas: And how long did that last?

Siklos: Quite a few years, actually, quite a few years, I think, basically I would think... up to...until the problems when Fidesz came to power. We were not unhappy with Fidesz when they first came to power, that was in '98, it was still okay because ...well, this was democracy. But this was the first time when we had the differences among colleagues and friends. Up to that time it didn't matter which party you supported, we got along fine, and it was wonderful that we could have different opinions. It was a symptom or sign of things being on the right track. And then Fidesz came to power, we said okay, we don't want them, I didn't vote for them, but... okay they are going to make a good job of it. But after that came this feeling of the country being split ....

Thomas: Why?

Siklos: There are many explanations of that. .... I certainly blame the right wing party for that..., partly because of personal reasons.. I don't think that the whole

combination should be merely political, it is more the personality, I really thought for a while that here is this man who was a very talented politician, Orbán, a very charismatic person, and whenever he spoke, even today, whenever he speaks, okay, I thought this ought to be interesting, ummm, yes, he is good, and after two minutes when I start thinking, I say no. But anyhow I actually think it was partly very personal reasons, so that here is a leader of the party who wants to transform the whole political scene, the whole country in his own image, like it's a fight, it's a football match, it's a life-and-death battle, politics.

Thomas: Was he sort of demonizing the other side?

Siklos: Yes, yes, there was a change in the spirit, exactly this is what is lost, the feeling of belonging together, the feeling of unity, the feeling of marching—this is a horrible word, but still... marching, hobbling, crawling, whatever!—in the same direction, and that was lost, that was lost, that was no good, and now I tend to say that somehow it had always been this way... They keep talking about the Hungarian way as being divided. Some people say that we like to have divided opinions, we like to, unfortunately, demonize. But Hungarians have so many different sides ...people speak today about the threat of civil war, you keep hearing about it.

Thomas: I have heard people talking about the fact that even people they have been friends with for years they sometimes no longer even talk to them, or if they speak they certainly don't talk about politics.

Siklos: That's very true. Same with us, same with us. I have very few friends who don't think in the same way I do. But there are some. But what I wanted to say is ... for all the intensifying of these conflicts, I still believe that the other face of the Hungarian people is also there, that we are basically a practical and peace-loving nation... I don't know.... But obviously the Roma issue does not hold anything good in store, it is really a gunpowder peril, it's explosive.

Thomas: What is the Roma problem?

Siklos: The Roma problem is that the Roma are not given opportunities, they are not given opportunities to study, education, and it's basically... partly the fault of Communism too, when the Roma did work but they were never given the opportunities to catch up, and have those educational opportunities, and now they are hopelessly behind...it's a vicious circle - since it was mostly physical work that they did, so when the changes came they were the first to be dismissed, they were the first to lose their jobs, and then came the poverty, the unemployment, the lack of education... , and since there are social problems everywhere, they are obviously coming out as scapegoats, they are just taking away, living on government money, people are saying.

Thomas: Do the Roma respond in a violent fashion?

- Siklos: Well, they never really did, but it looks as if there is a possibility and there have been instances where they reacted violently, I don't think they are a violent people, but their cup may get full.
- Thomas: I have heard that their population has greatly increased...much more rapidly than the Magyars.
- Siklos: Yes, more babies born, but on the other hand the mortality rate is much higher. Actually it is so horrible that you only see the bad things on TV. Just today it was the first time that they actually showed a school where Roma and non-Roma are taught together, where there is a positive example, and I really think that this is what they should show, because there may be more good examples as well, but that's not what they show. It was really a revelation to see at least one.
- Thomas: I heard a minister of education speak in Berkeley about the law passed by the government requiring the Roma children to go to kindergarten, they had to begin their education at kindergarten, which had not been true before, this was several years ago, for some reason they had not gone to kindergarten and thus started school a little bit behind everybody else and therefore had a hard time. I wonder if there are proposals to do more of that kind of legislation.
- Siklos: Not enough, definitely not enough.
- Thomas: I've gotten the impression from books about the Roma that they have a very, very different culture, that they don't want to be assimilated, they resist being educated like the Magyars, let's say. I don't know if that's true or not.
- Siklos: I very much doubt it.
- Thomas: So they would like to get more education and more training and better jobs, they are no longer a traveling people, a migratory people. So that's a serious social problem. Do you think that things will change if Fidesz wins the elections next year?
- Siklos: I have always been an optimist and I still am. I don't like Fidesz but the socialist government really did a very messy job of governing, they certainly did a very bad job. I quite like the present prime minister Bajnai [spells it], but it's obvious that he is just a fire fighter, putting out fires, he is a good manager but something more might be needed. First of all I hope that the right wing will not come out as victoriously as many people say, because... you know that in the EU elections we have 14 seats ... the election for the representatives of Hungary in the European parliament, in that election Fidesz came out as the big winner but more importantly, the socialists got 4 seats and the far right got as many as 3, this is quite representative. But of course very few people went to vote. So I hope that the extreme right is not going to get stronger ... I don't know, I hope they don't get into the parliament, or they

may get in, but then, with a Fidesz government, they will just have to carry on with the rest of Europe, so I don't expect a political upheaval, I expect them [Fidesz] doing a better management of the country financially and....

- Thomas: Well, wasn't Orban's earlier term, from '98 to 2002, I believe, wasn't the country well-run?
- Siklos: It was well-run in some respects, especially in the first two years, economically speaking, but those phenomena of sweeping the country with excessive patriotic slogans actually began there, and their cultural policy for instance was something that I did not approve of. But in some ways they did an efficient job and I think they will do an efficient job in terms of the economy.
- Thomas: Just to clarify, the far right is not part of Fidesz, but Fidesz cooperates with the far right. Or maybe I should say the far right cooperates with Fidesz.
- Siklos: There are debates about this. I think it is certainly true that Fidesz made it possible or paved the way for the far right to become a prominent political force. They may never have wanted that, what they wanted was simply to get as many votes as possible. But .... instead of the votes going to them, the votes were cast separately and strengthened the far right party.
- Thomas: It's just that the far right has become more prominent or more powerful in the population.
- Siklos: In the population, and for this, the party of Fidesz is to blame. But I never implied and I don't think that they share those views with the far right, definitely not. .... I don't know how much you know about the Hungarian political scene... Fidesz will surely win but they will hopefully need the cooperation of another so called conservative party, the MDF, the Hungarian Democratic Forum, if they are strong enough, and I hope they come out pretty strong from this.
- Thomas: The socialists, are they just incompetent or corrupt or both?
- Siklos: I would like to say they are incompetent, and some of them are corrupt, well, Hungary is corrupt, I don't think we can deny that.
- Thomas: Well, corruption is everywhere.
- Siklos: Corruption is everywhere. I don't know how we could change. Whoever wins, I think corruption must be contained.
- Thomas: One would hope so. But I have heard that the socialist leaders are actually the same or the same families or the heirs of the Communists.

- Siklos: That's not my view. It's a new generation. And anyway, Fidesz has the same fathers, they have as many Communist fathers as you have in the other parties.
- Thomas: But I have heard, more specifically, that when Communism failed, some Communist leaders who were insiders bought state properties and sold them at an advantage and made a lot of money.
- Siklos: That's true, true enough. But if you talk about the Communist leaders in general, this is just not the case. I really hate to call them the sons of the old Communists. ... there were many, many reform-minded people among the Communists. I'm not saying some were not the opposite, but in any case, if the present leaders were competent I would forgive them their fathers, who cares... would I care about how they had made their money if they did a good job in parliament or as a minister...?. But they never did anything unlawful, I guess.
- Thomas: Do you think the populace, and particularly the younger members of the population, are turned off by the incompetence, that is, turned off of participating in the democracy, giving up on the idea of a democratic government, becoming disillusioned, disinterested?
- Siklos: I don't think they even know what democracy is. They don't practice it, and they don't know what it is. And they reach for order, they see democracy as a chaos, many of them.
- Thomas: Is there nostalgia for Communism?
- Siklos: Many people say yes. I think there must be, I'm not nostalgic, but everybody knows that in some ways it's good to be secure. It's the security that people long for, knowing that you will have a job tomorrow, knowing security. I guess it's probably my generation, the older generation, who are particularly hurt by this lost feeling of security. Young people may not, stress for them is a way of life. Actually I feel myself very very fortunate to have lived when I lived. I could see the changes, I felt free at the time whenever I lived... there were degrees of freedom but it was good to see this process, it was a positive concept, I was maturing or growing up somehow parallel with the whole country becoming more and more open, it was a positive concept.
- Thomas: I have been told...there is a loss of community now.
- Siklos: There was more time for relationships, you were not harassed—that's a very poor word—you were not hurried, even when you had two jobs, you still had more time. I can see this in my own children. I mean, when I was 30 I never felt that my life is going, I'm going to get old, it was not an issue, and these children say oh I'm already 33... so these problems with the passing of time... I never felt it was an issue until I was about 40-odd.

- Thomas: Is there now more idealizing of youth with advertising?
- Siklos: Partly, and partly that you have to make a career. When I was 30 you could make a career, but basically you had a good job, you concentrated on the task, you concentrated on what you did, and this was enough. Now people have to concentrate more on, okay, ... what do I wish to achieve.
- Thomas: Is it achievement in the sense of success at a career or achievement in the sense of money?
- Siklos: Both, whichever is important for the person.
- Thomas: Is there more emphasis now on the economic, on the remuneration, than on the job itself?
- Siklos: I don't think so. But it seems that career opportunities are more diverse, there are more choices, so maybe that also explains it, it's easier to be feeling a ... no one wants to be a loser. You might not have been as good as another in my time but you were still more content with what you did, but now you don't want to be considered a loser, there's more competition, more feeling of a lack of self-esteem, I think it's more damaging. I'm pleased with my job, I think I have achieved what I have achieved, I'm happy teaching, I'm happy translating, but I feel a nostalgia, because of the problems of my children or the younger generation. They may not feel it themselves, but I can see the struggles that many young people have, and they are more difficult than the struggles I had, so it's not my own life that I want to change but I want to see them be happy.
- Thomas: Do you think that relates to the difference in the economic system? In other words, I wonder how much a market economy promotes competition.
- Siklos: It is, it definitely relates to it, but the world, capitalist America, would be the same twenty years ago as it is today. The United States, or the western countries, have they also changed?
- Thomas: I'd have to think about it. Actually, I don't think I remember a time since I've been grown when it didn't seem to me that there was simply massive advertising, pushing, selling. I had one person tell me that she saw an advertisement in an American magazine, this was in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after World War II, saying You have to have this item—whatever it was—or you're nobody. You are what you buy, you are what you own. There's an awful lot of pushing them to acquire, or you're not with it, you're not up there where you're supposed to be if you don't have whatever it is, a big house, a swimming pool, or today it's electronic equipment.
- Siklos: But at least the pace of life was slower.

- Thomas: But I think this pushing of products and buying and keeping up with other people, getting ahead of them in what you own, may increase the pace of life because you spend every moment trying to get money or trying to buy things.
- Siklos: It's interesting, but I don't always see it as materialism now, when you ask me about whether it's the money, and it's not necessarily the money, not always, or not only. I think it's more the means to do what you want, money as means rather than money per se, to realize yourself, to accomplish yourself, to break out, and in many people, and in my own children, the stress is not about getting the money, it's about the achievement, to be appreciated, to be applauded, to get recognition, from your peers.
- Thomas: Whereas you didn't feel that so much earlier in your own life, it was more about your own judgment of satisfaction about what you were doing. There's a big difference there.
- Siklos: Yes. I felt pretty happy doing what I was doing, making the translation of the book, and ... well, I still do like teaching. Not every minute! After the changes, in '95-'96, I was in the States with a Fulbright teacher exchange program, in Alabama, Montgomery, I was teaching in an American high school, so that was a very good experience for both of us. I took my husband, too.
- Thomas: What was the experience, that was good?
- Siklos: Well, first of all, we were talking about 2 or 3 jobs at home, there we just had one job, basically I was much freer, also, for the first half of the year, we were just the two of us. That was good, too .
- Thomas: Did you have more salary teaching there than over here?
- Siklos: Oh yes. And Alabama was a cheap state, so that was very good, we saved money so we had a 6-week tour of America after teaching for a year. It was eye-opening because it's one thing to be there for 5 weeks [as she was at Brown] and another thing to stay a year, to have an apartment and a car to drive and to see how efficient America was, in every way, how organized... it was a very positive experience.
- Thomas: Did you notice any difference between the country when you were at Brown and [this time]?
- Siklos: The scenery, and of course at Brown University it was more artificial, a select number of people, you just got to know the professors, you didn't go out to the super market, to see the cashier, and you didn't go to the immigration office, or talked on the phone with the electricity company . I don't think I can compare, that was more for tourists.

- Thomas: And how did your life in Montgomery differ from your life here, aside from the fact that you only had one job there?
- Siklos: I had more time for my husband because my husband didn't work. He did try to find a job and he did find one and was not paid so eventually he left it and found a friend and he spent some time with him helping out, actually it was quite interesting because the friend had a Hungarian wife, the man was American, and they both were retired Army officers, and the man was building a house of grandiose size, just by himself. He was lucky to have my husband and my husband was lucky to have him, so they went to the lake and worked together. It was all very different, I worked, he didn't, we had more time, for instance we went to the synagogue, which we never do at home, I'm just not religious, but in America you felt, well, you needed community, we went to the synagogue not very often but on holidays. We went to a bridge club with friends. It was a different social life.
- Thomas: Hardly comparable. Here you were born and bred in the society, you have long-time friends, usual customs, but there everything was new. Hardly comparable, except you spoke of American efficiency, more efficient than here?
- Siklos: Well, the thing is, in Hungary everybody criticizes the other, everybody thinks they could do it differently and better. I think it's a tradition. But in America you just see that, okay, well, here is a job, and some people are paid for the job, and they do it best, they know it best, so why would I bother, it's his job, he does it well, I trust him. I think they're organized. So that's good.
- Thomas: I don't know whether you know this, but in America there's a lot of what historians call civil society, that is, if people want to get something done they organize themselves, they sponsor activities. Talking about the news on the radio, what you hear on the radio, there are the public radio, also public television stations, in the United States which are very much supported by members from the population; that's sort of a civil society. You want to improve your schools, the parents get together, there are parent-teacher associations. Is there much of that, of what we call civil society, here in Hungary?
- Siklos: Sadly, no, I don't see much sign of it.... I'm sure there are positive examples, like churches may organize that way. There are individual efforts, but it's not a custom. It's just not a tradition.
- Thomas: You're an optimist. I hear Hungarians are pessimists. [relates story of being asked if Hungarians are pessimistic] I wonder if Hungarians think this is expected of them, or they think it themselves and they tell other people this.
- Siklos: We used to be pessimistic, in socialist times it was said about us, or realistic, as we call it. I think there was a survey recently which showed we are pretty

much high on the pessimist list, on what our expectations about the future are, and we have very negative expectations. People were euphoric after the changes, maybe people are disillusioned now, that's true. One still feels that it could have been... I don't feel it has to be so difficult, it can still be better, sure. It takes time,

Thomas: [discussion of attitudes and imperfections in America] Is there anything else you would like to say about the differences in everyday life under these two different political and economic situations?

Siklos: Well, there obviously are better opportunities, we are enjoying traveling, that we can do. It's a shame that the country... that we messed up so many things, but all in all I think it's much better.

Thomas: Well, I think it's time to stop. Thank you so much.

[End of Interview]