

An Interview with Lajos Veraszto

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

Lajos Veraszto is an English language teacher and the founder and co-owner of Dover nyelviskola, a large (500 class) English language school for adults in Budapest. He was born and grew up one of 7 children of a poor farmer in Kardoskut. He describes how his father was declared a kulak when the Communists came to power in the late 1940's, and he tells of the pressure by the government on the farmers to join cooperatives and of the heavy taxation of farmers in the early 1950's. His experience of the revolution of 1956 was that of a boy in a country town who knew nothing of Budapest and in a place where there seem to have been only a few committed Communists.

He first attended drama school and then transferred to the university in Budapest. After graduating he began teaching English at a workers' club in a factory in Csesed. He managed to teach the banned Orwell book "Animal Farm" because the students liked it so much he was never reported. He organized a language department there in the factory. After his return from 3 years' working as a tile contractor in the United States, the government had changed in Hungary and he was able to turn the workers' club language school into a private language school which he owned with 2 friends.

He has many comments about both the Communist government in Hungary and the subsequent political and economic situation in the country after 1989 about which he has many criticisms.

MT This is Major Thomas on the 15th of November, 2003, Saturday, and I am recording in the apartment at Csorcz utca 5 in Budapest, and I am interviewing Lajos Veraszto. And I think we'll begin by asking you, Lajos, about when and where you were born and a little bit about your family.

LV Yes, I was born in 1945, in August, I don't exactly know what day I was born because when my father went to register me he didn't know exactly, they asked him when I was born and they said he was born at the end of August so they put down 31st. That's the last day of August, you see, so I don't know when to celebrate my birthday, but never mind, it's not a big deal.

MT You always do celebrate it.

LV I do, yes, so my official, like the queen has 2 birthdays, I mean the English queen has 2 birthdays, I have an official one and according to my mother I was born on the 27th. But she became uncertain about it. (laughter) Okay, I was born in the middle of nowhere, somewhere in Hungary, the war was just over, and it was chaotic, you know, and people were happy just to be alive. And they were very poor, anyway, you know, my parents were farmers.

MT Your parents were farmers?

LV Farmers, right, okay? And my father was a very clever man, he was disowned by his parents because he married a very poor girl, you know, and since my mother had nothing at all so they started with nothing and, okay, I was the 5th child in the family, the one before me died like when she was 6 weeks old so I didn't know her, and we altogether were 7 children but as I told you one of them died, the rest of us are still alive, my parents are not alive now unfortunately, my mother died last summer. We were a very poor but very close family. We lived in a, okay, not a ranch but a farm house, a very poor farm house, and then when I was 5 years old we moved to another village and then we had to move out of that place too, I tell you later about that.....

MT And this was where, in eastern.....

LV All right, in the southeast part of Hungary, it's about 50 kilometers from Yugoslavia, from the Yugoslav border and 50 kilometers from the Romanian border. It is called the stormy corner of the country, stormy corner, but the county where I come from is called the peaceful county, bekes megye, bekes is peaceful, but the area is called the stormy corner because there were a lot of revolutions about the balance in the area so it's not very peaceful.

MT This is not in Transylvania.

LV No, no, not in Transylvania, but it almost became Transylvania because the Romanians claimed the territory as far as the Tisza, the river Tisza, and we are trans-Tisza, okay, that's not trans-Danubia, but trans-Tisza, yes. It's blank, that area's flat as a pancake, very farming area, like Kansas, but it's dry, dry now, it's become a very, very dry area, and so when I was 5 years old we moved to another house, that was very large but then we had to move out and then we moved in a house that my father built but it was not, it wasn't finished and there was a room that we lived the 6 children, because by then we were 6 children, and we lived in a room that was like 5 meters by 5 meters, it's about how many square feet can it be, about 15 feet by 15 feet, it was the room, the bedroom, the kitchen, the living room, the bath room, everything, that was the only room we lived in, and I still remember it as a very nice period of my life. We were really confined, you can imagine, yes, the 6 children and the 2 parents, in that little room that was used as a kitchen and, you know, everything, it was everything, plus we had visitors because, for instance during the October revolution in '56 we took in other people and they were sleeping in the stables, you know, in the barn and all over, because they got stuck, some people, some people from, I mean they had a circus, they worked for a circus, they were circus people like acrobats and horse riders and I don't know what, jugglers and magicians, and it was nice, it was fun, and then, okay, we gathered together in that room in the evenings and we played cards for like 2 months because the country was ~~federalized~~ for about 2 or 3 months during the October revolution, you see.

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MT What did your father raise, or what was the crop?

paralyzed

LV Okay, he always grew crops like wheat and maize, corn, you see, and sugar roots, sugar beets, and it was very interesting, perhaps it might be interesting from an historic point of view, that there was a time when the farmers were forced to grow cotton, imitating the Russian or Chinese, I don't know, Communist habits or culture, and they found out that they should try cotton.

MT Did it grow?

LV Which of course was bad. No, no, no, no, no, but we had to, it was obligatory, it was compulsory to grow cotton. So actually when my father started his married life with my mother, then they didn't have anything, but my father was a very brilliant man and a very clever man, he had brains, but then he had to go to the war, he was a soldier, and my mother was at home with 3 children, one in the oven, then my father came home, then I was in the oven, but the thing was, I don't know how but he managed to buy some land and then he got better off somehow, and then he managed to buy a threshing machine.....

MT Is this at the end of the war?

LV Yes, after the war, like 2 years after the war, and so he bought this threshing machine, and it was a big thing for a farmer, because then he went around and he had threshing for everybody in the area, for the farmers in the area, and he was considered a rich man by then, yes, but the problem was that 2 years later everything was nationalized, you see, so he had to give in his threshing machine and for nothing, of course, okay.....

MT And his land too?

LV No, not his land, I come to that later. Okay, he got the paper, a letter, that he was supposed to take the threshing machine into the I don't know where, some state farm or whatever, and he had to do it because the letter said if he didn't take it he would have to go to prison or I don't know what kind of punishment he would have, and he was very clever because then he went to a scrap yard and he took the machine into pieces, and then he went to the council and said that I'm sorry but I have to sell this thing in pieces, so at least he got some money, he didn't give it away.

MT That's very clever.

LV Yes. But he had this threshing machine and he was considered a rich man by the Communist government, he was declared a kulak, so that was a problem, because kulaks had a lot of disadvantages, you see, because their sons, children, were not allowed to go to certain universities or places to study.

MT When did you start school?

LV I started the grade school in 1951, when I was 6 years old. That was in the village, the small village where I grew up. Kardoskut, it means "swordy well", because it's got a well that belonged to the Kardos family, some people said it was called that because there was a well there where they found a sword but it's not true, I think it belonged to the Kardos family and they had a well there where the cattle from the area went to drink.

MT So you went to elementary school there.

LV In Kardos, all of us, all the children.

MT And what about your next step?

LV Yes, I went to the gymnasium, the high school, in Oroshaza, that's about 8 kilometers away from our place. Ever since I remember we had to work, all the children, we had to go to work on the farm, okay, when I was small I had to feed the pigs or clean the barn, you know, or prepare for them, the animals, and I liked it. When I was 6 years old I knew how to ^{milk} make a cow. It's very strange because when I first came to Budapest I always felt like a peasant, and I felt terribly inferior, (laughter) to these cats here who knew how to play music, and so on, and it caused me a lot of bad feelings, you see, inferiority, but later I realized that it was beautiful, because they didn't know things that I knew, and vice versa.

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7/26/04

MT At the time you went to the elementary school and the gymnasium, your father was not considered a kulak, there wasn't any discrimination against you in the school.

LV Okay, he was very clever again, I think, because he gave up farming as such. He, okay, he had a horse and a cart and he worked as a carrier? You know, he put things in the cart and he took things from one place to another and he helped people to move people or he carried the straw or the hay for people, people employed him to take these things.

MT I think that's a carrier.

LV I don't know what you call this. Okay and then somehow they took him off the list.

MT Off what list?

LV Off the kulak list. Somehow he managed to do that, to achieve that.

MT So you were in elementary or gymnasium at that time?

LV I was in the primary school, the elementary school.

MT And there was no prejudice against your going to the elementary school.

LV No, no, no, no, I was just a poor boy, which was lucky. We were poor, we were, yes, because the threshing machine was gone, you see, we had no land of our own, you see, we just had this house unfinished and then, it was not stone but you know just dirt, dirt wall, you know, they just put some dirt in, you know, and then just pounded it and then they did stuff like that, you see, we still have that house. And so it was a little cheap house that we lived in, no conveniences, we had an outhouse, very very primitive circumstances. But I think we were very happy, I wouldn't complain.

MT You had 5-----were they brothers? sisters?

LV Okay, we ^{were} ~~had~~ 5 boys and 1 girl.

MT Poor girl!

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LV Oh she had to work like a boy, really, yeah yeah yeah, she was grown up with us and okay, she is still a very diligent woman, she learned how to work. Okay, the best thing in my childhood was, I think, that we learned how to work and how to appreciate work and we learned to appreciate work and what other people's work is worth, you see, so we would never throw away rubbish, you know, or garbage, or never litter, we would never destroy other people's work, you see.

MT A good lesson.

LV Yes, very good, I think it's one of the best lessons parents can give to their children, to know how to work, to teach them how to work. Okay, my father was clever because he changed careers so he gave up farming as such, I mean growing plants, because in 1950 the cooperatives started, and people were practically forced to join the cooperatives, and many many people hanged themselves, yes, just imagine, they had like say 1000 acres of land and they were forced to give it up altogether and they took away everything, and they kind of persuaded them to join the cooperatives but practically they were forced. I remember the time when they went to these people's places to sort of I don't know to persuade them, they gave them some persuasion, and then if they didn't give in they would take them to the council hall and there were certain rooms there where they had to stay for days.

MT Part of the persuasion.

LV Yes, part of the persuasion policy. And then they gave in finally, most of them. Very interesting. My father never joined the cooperative farm, and he was always very frank about it, you know, he talked with, really strange because some people, okay, if some people said something like I don't believe in your system, or something, they were taken away, you see. But my father was always very frank about it, you see, and he said it, said something in public and still he was never taken away. I think he said it in a charming way, he always said it with a smile.....

MT Very tactful.

LV Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah! he said like Ah well, I'm going to stay on my own, I would rather work alone, I don't like that man because I don't want to work instead of that man, you know, who I know, he has joined the cooperative and I know he's a lazy bum and I don't want to work instead of him, you know, and he said it like this, you know, and somehow they forgave him and they let him alone, they didn't pester him.

MT Was that common?

LV To leave him alone? Or?

MT To leave anybody alone.

LV No, no, it was very very exceptional that they didn't bother you. They didn't bother him perhaps because he had this cart and this cart and the horses and he went, you know, I mean from place to place, as you know, he was employed by other people.

MT Would he have been considered a worker or working class?

LV Between, between, yes, perhaps he was more of a working class man than a farmer.

MT And then they wouldn't come down on him.

LV Yes, yes. Somehow was in limbo. Okay, so neither a farmer nor a working class person, you see, because he didn't work in a factory. But he managed to get away with it, somehow, I don't know. So I did not know what Communism was, really, I mean from that point of view, you see, so we didn't work in a cooperative farm, my father didn't work in a factory, and I didn't know much about the essence of Communism, the point of Communism.

MT Didn't you learn it in school?

LV We did, of course, I know that part, which is not true, of course.

MT But you didn't live it

LV I didn't live it, I didn't live it in my private life. And I guess the talk about it at home like in negative terms, because I remember I was a very bad fighter, you know, I wasn't like other kids that fought and beat up each other, because they could beat me up, I wasn't very weak I was just clumsy, you see. And I remember that it happened that one of the kids whose father was a member of the party beat me up, yes, and I was helpless, and I just couldn't fight, I couldn't fight back and then I was just shouting "You dirty Communist!" But at that time, in 1952, it was very dangerous, people, I mean grown-up people of course, were taken away for years and years, were put in prison for years and years.

MT Did the boy report you?

LV No, no. (Laughter)

MT He wanted to fight.

LV Yes, he wanted to fight. He was very happy, you know, he was a hero and he could beat me. But I remember when my mother heard it she said "Don't say such things". (laughter)

MT You were warned.

LV Yes. Okay, and then my mother was working as a cleaner at the school, we were the school cleaners, which meant that she had to get up like at four o'clock in the morning, go to school, make the fire in the stoves, you see, we had to heat the place and that would be stoves during the cold. And then when I was 10 years old I had to start doing it too, I went with her, every morning I got up at four o'clock, went to the school to clean the place and to wipe the desks and everything and I need to dust, to dust everything and then to take the ashes out of the stoves and carry it out. It was good!

MT Good experience.

LV Very good. Well, at the time I hated it. But my sister, okay there were two schools that we had to do and we did that and my sister went to one and I went with my mother because I was only 10 years old. And then my brothers were working with my father because my father had some land, okay, there were very very few private farms, those who were stubborn or those who had better land or those who had land that was not worth much, you see, because if a rich farmer didn't join the cooperative farm they took away the good land from him and they gave him land that was sort of bad land.....

MT Was that the kind of land your father rented?

LV He worked for the farmers who owned those poor land, yes, okay, because some of the farmers got very old by then and then they were unable to cultivate the land and so on but they wouldn't give in, you know, the properties.....

MT And your brothers worked with them.

LV Yes, yes, we worked with them. I remember one of them, I remember one of them who had got the good land, you see, but was a bastard, he was a real bastard, that landowner, he used a lot of land but a lot of that land was left, and I remember that we used to have this hand mower, a scythe, and one of my brothers, okay he was like 14 years old, and he left too high the stubble, he left sort of high stubble, because okay usually the peasants in those times were very very economical and then they left like 2 centimeters of stubble, but my brother left like 5 centimeters and he had to do the whole thing again, yes, and he had to slave.....

MT That I imagine taught him a lesson.

LV Yes, yes, absolutely.

MT Then what happened to you all and where were you in '56?

LV Okay, we were in the village, and we lived in that room, you know, and actually by then we had another room but one of the teachers who came to the village had no flat so my family rented it out to her, you see, so we still used the finished room, it was good. Okay, so I was 11 when '56 came. Oh I remember when the starting night, yes, okay, we had a small radio, that was called the people's radio, I suppose, I mean people have told you about.....

MT No.

LV A small radio. It was called nep radio, nep means people, the Hungarian people, okay the nep radio it had only Kossuth and Petofi the two broadcasts, and

MT Those were both from where, broadcast from where?

LV From Budapest. Kossuth radio Budapest, I remember the signal, (he hums), that was the signal, and then the announcer came on and he said "Kossuth radio Budapest, now the news", you see, and I remember how the, so one morning it was funny because how strange, it was all somber music, classical music, you see, one morning, and okay my parents were farm people they didn't care about classical music very much, they were not against it but you know it was unusual that you know there was nothing but somber music, very somber, like sheet iron, and then the news came, and actually I think

they didn't break the news I mean they didn't break the music, I mean okay the news came usually at six o'clock, at eight o'clock, at two hours, you see, yes, so they didn't announce it on the program, how do you say, off the program, I don't know, it just came with the regular news, I suppose they didn't have the courage to announce the big news.....

MT So it only came at the time of the regular news broadcast, they didn't interrupt the actual program.....

LV Yes, that's right, they didn't interrupt the program.

MT So what did they say?

LV They said that I remember that Moscow report, Moscow radio reported, I don't know what other than Moscow news agency or Russian news agency reported that our beloved comrade Stalin V or Josep V Stalin died, you see, and there was a man staying with us and I remember he went pale, I remember his face, yes, yes, yes, yes, and he said you see, but my father said "Oh did the Russian bastard (laughter) did the Russian bastard really die?"(laughter)

MT Finally? (laughter)

LV Finally, yes! That was interesting, that was very interesting.

MT Did schools continue?

LV Oh yes, I think we went there, we went to school that day. Of course they commemorated the event there too.

MT What did they do?

LV I think we had to stand up, you know, in silence for a minute.
(laughter)

MT And the students understood.

LV Oh we want to play football, they just want to play football. (laughter)
The teachers in our village were not Communists, not at all, they had to pretend, you know, but they were not Communists. And then I also remember when Khrushchev's coming to power was announced, you see, and there was the congress, the 20th congress I think it was, ok, so it was a big big congress.

MT Did they talk or did you hear about Khrushchev's speech about Stalin's crimes?

LV Yes, yes, but I didn't pay attention. But I remember.....

MT It was announced?

LV Oh yes, oh yes, and I remember they said something about ^{Brezhnev} ~~Brailov~~,
you know, who was even a bigger bastard than Stalin, if it's possible,
you know, who was his hatchet man. And then everybody thought it

would be better but somehow it is unthinkable that this Russian occupation would come to an end, it was unthinkable.

MT So people didn't really think there was going to be a big change?

LV No, no. Oh another very important thing I remember between 1950 and 1956, I remember 1951, 1952 and 1953 and that's very important I think, because people had to give away their product to the state, that is most of them, and okay there were certain rations, you see, that the farmers could keep, people could keep, but all the rest of the crop went to the state, because we paid compensation for being a war criminal, or what do you call them, responsible for the war, you know, the Second World War, yes, one of the war criminal countries, you know, like Germany, Hungary and Italy. But the Italians were lucky because they were occupied by the western powers. But Hungary was punished hard. The factories were taken away, I mean the equipment from the factories, and for three or four years, I don't remember exactly when it came to an end, I think for four years we had to give in all the products that were surplus, you see, and it was miserable really, okay, you couldn't, you weren't allowed to kill pigs, to have pig killings, you see, you had to have a very very special permit to have an animal killed, you see, not for hygienic reasons, because all your animals were counted and registered, you see.

MT And went to the state.

LV And went to the state, there were certain amounts, you know, a certain percentage of it was allowed to, okay, if you were 2 people in the family they allowed you to have as much as they thought you needed, yes, and then okay the rest of it went to the state. If you were 6 children, I mean if you were 6 people in the family they stated how many pigs you could have, you were allowed to have for your self but even then you had to have a special permit to have a pig killing.

MT And so were you hungry?

LV No, no. I would lie if I said that we were starving.

MT Well, not starving maybe, but hungry.

LV Not really hungry. No, not hungry. Okay, well, we had very simple food and okay, sometimes my mother told us, leave something for but that was good too because we were taught not to be greedy and to pay attention to each other, you see, think about others. I think it was a good thing. But we were not hungry, we were never hungry. Never.

MT So what happened in '56?

LV One more thing about this having to give products in. I remember that there were like one kilometer long line that the farmers had to bring their pigs, their cows, their wheat, their barley, to give in, it was a compulsory giving thing, you see, and all of that was taken to Russia as compensation for years, and the farmers, I remember how some of the farmers started to talk about things, especially after Stalin died, but many people were still taken away, you see, I know about one who never came back, was a farmer, he died somewhere, one of them got out of prison and never came back to the village but he went to Belgium, he came back to live in Hungary in 1991. There were people who stayed in prison for years.

MT This was because.....

LV Okay because they talked about things, you see, or once somebody reported them, I don't know, there were always reporters, you see, and then some of them were taken away because they tried to hide some of their crop, that's cheating, and then some of them killed a pig illegally, yeah, they were put in jail like three months, four months.

MT There must have been talk after Khrushchev's talk.

LV Yes, but still, I don't know, I didn't realize much difference, I didn't realize there was much difference, but somehow it sort of eased up a little bit. I think, yes, because I remember there was a new purpose under the council elected, I remember how this man who was the Stalin of the village, you see, removed in '54, and he was removed and that was somehow a new release.

MT And that would have been the year after Stalin died.

LV Yes, yes, yes. There was a man who was considered very very rebellious who was nominated but then he was not elected because the party still had long hands but there was a milder man, you know, chosen to be the president of the council who was obviously a Communist.

MT So do you think that winds were sort of blowing even before the rebellion of the students?

LV Oh yes, oh yes, oh yes, there was some easement.

MT Well, do you mean easement in pressure from the Communists or an easement of feeling and talking?

LV Okay, for instance, some people left the cooperatives. In '54, you see, so that certainly was a tremendous easement for farmers, you see, and even though they didn't get their land back, of course they did not, they were allowed to have some of their land back, there was a limit of course like I don't know like say 10 acres I don't know, but that was a huge huge easement, you see, and it's funny because my father bought some land back, you see, and I was crying literally, I was 9 years old, and I thought oh my father could be so stupid to buy land, you know, instead of having the house built, you know, and I never understood it but now I do, he was very clever. He bought some very good land and then three years later it was taken away, not taken away but given some very very bad land, absolutely useless, nothing to do there, yes, because after '56 they took away the stuff again, so in a way after '56 for a while it was even stricter than it was before because they started the cooperatives again which had fallen to pieces, you know, in the '56 revolution or because of the bad managing, you see, so many of them had fallen to pieces, and in '57 they tried again, you see, so there was another wave of this persuasion procedure, you see.

MT So was that, do you think, the main effect you felt where you were of the rebellion in '56?

LV Everything, everything. I think it was the bitterness of the war still, somehow, you see, that we were, okay.....

MT That you felt afterwards, you mean?

LV Yes, yes, yes, and because of the war and, okay, I think the farmers were wise enough to know, to have realized that we were fighting against the Russians and then we had to adore the Russians, you know, we had to say, you had to shout out loud like “Long live Stalin, long live the comrades”, and so on, and it was alien, it was schizophrenic, and the farmers and everybody in Hungary I think had this schizophrenic state, you see, state of mind, you see, okay we were against them in the war, many many Hungarians died in the war like I don’t know a million, you see, and there was this famous bomb battle that the Germans put us in front of them, and

END OF TAPE

MT And you said you remembered the day.....

LV And I think it rooted in the war too. Okay, I remember that.....

MT The day it started?

LV The day it started, yes. It was an October day, of course.....

MT You were where?

LV I was in the village, I was in the village and it was a normal school day, it was supposed to be a normal school day, and then we heard on the news that there were demonstrations and protests in Budapest and then there were these gatherings near Parliament, I didn’t even know what Parliament was, I have to tell you that (laughter). Okay, all we knew was that there was a revolution. And I went to school and then

when I arrived the other kids were burning books in the courtyard, the Russian books, the Russian study books, yes, which I didn't like.

MT The students were doing this?

LV Yes, children, I mean, you know, some of the I don't know the civilized world, really, and I felt bad, really, I felt strange, you see, because I think I had heard of books being burned, you know, in Germany, and somehow I don't know why, I didn't like it, so I felt strange, I think partly because they dirtied up the porch and I was supposed to clean it later (laughter). But somehow I still felt strange, you see. And I remember when the teachers arrived, and they were sort of smiling, and they told the children they shouldn't do that, okay, and three of the teachers arrived there and it was near the church, we had a small church in the village, and then there was a churchyard, I mean not a cemetery but you know a garden, okay and then there was another sort of courtyard and there was the school, it was an old building, a very simple building, and one of the teachers, I remember the smile on his face when he arrived, you see, he was a very young man, who I came to know when I was about 4 years old, he was one of those kulak boys who was not allowed to go to school and he was a smart man but he was not allowed to continue studies but somehow he managed to get a job as an assistant teacher, you see. Later on, it's very interesting because I first knew him when I was 5 years old then I went to the kindergarten, there was a kind of a kindergarten, I don't know, and I remember I saw him that first in my life, I was like 5 years old, and then he taught me in the primary school like when I was 10 years old, and then he taught me for two years in the 5th and 6th grade and then the revolution came and then he had to leave the village, I tell you later, I tell you about it later. And then I went to secondary school and then one time he came in and he was one of the teachers, in the secondary school, and then I went to the university and then he was teaching there too, you see. He was in the linguistics department. It was very strange, yes, dear friends, yes, very strange.

MT But he came in with a big smile.

LV Okay, he had a big smile, you know, he was happy, you could see that he was happy but he didn't want to show it openly, you know, and then we went in and then they told us about it, you know, that that is the solution, and we don't know what's going to happen, they were very frank about it that they didn't know what was going to happen, actually it was him who said that we musn't rush it because the Russians would certainly not leave it at that, you see. But everybody was enthusiastic. It's strange because the children somehow were more enthusiastic than the teachers, the teachers I think had sort of self-control. They knew, they were smart enough to know that, well, the Russians, Russia was Russia, the Soviet Union was the Soviet Union, you see. The following day there was this big demonstration in the village, and I've never ever seen so many people in the village together, and we started from the church, it's about one and a half kilometers away from the village hall, and I remember that the people gathered there, but there were so many people that many people were almost at the village hall, you see, because they were gathered along the road, you see, and then we went there and this teacher of us, this friend of mine, now he is a friend of mine, recited "Rise, Hungarians" by Petofi, it was a famous poem, Petofi allegedly recited in front of the national museum but now they say it might be only a legend, but still Petofi is stirring. And then this teacher recited this poem and we were shouting I remember very enthusiastically and saying "We swear, we swear that we won't stay prisoners anymore" or something like that, you see, won't stay slaves anymore, yes, okay.....

MT Let me ask you: there were no Russian soldiers, no Russian officials officially.....

LV No, no, no, not in that area. And I remember that there was no violence at all, no violence at all, and that man who was the son of the village the former president of the council, he was somehow forgiven too, because essentially he wasn't a bad man, he wasn't a

bastard, he believed in Communism, you see, he believed what he was doing, he believed what he was doing was right, and he treated, okay he lived very simply too as a true Communist should, you see, he never had any more for himself than he claimed that other people should have, you see, so he was a just man, a fair man in his own way.

MT Unlike some other.....

LV Yeah, yeah, yeah, that's right, so he did not accumulate a fortune. He was there, too, he was very sad, I remember he was crying, yes, but they never beat him up or never insulted him, oh there were a few people who shouted at him like "You dirty Communist", okay, but nobody hit him. And then we played cards for a few months, for 3 months, I remember I was a kid but I loved playing cards, so '56 means like playing cards to me (laughter) and big smoke because in that room there were like 20 people squeezed in and we were playing cards at 3 tables, you see.....

MT Because school didn't start even after the Russian tanks came in.

LV Didn't start. People stopped working , you see, yes, people just did the most important things what they really had to do, like to clean the barns, that was all they did, somehow, and the workers stopped working for a while, there were strikes, yes, and I remember some of the boys, young men who were like in their 20's and to work in the next town, and the factories didn't work there so they were just hanging around and we played cards. But then I had to go to school, and school continued.

MT But there was a time there when the schools were closed.

LV I don't know how long it was closed but it was closed for some time, not for a long time, like one week or so. But I really loved the smoke and the people around there playing cards and there was this circus man, the circus people who got stuck because they couldn't travel on, actually there was a curfew so people were not allowed to go out after I don't know eight o'clock I don't know.

MT But you all did not experience any of the soldiers or the tanks or the shooting or the destruction that Budapest underwent.

LV No, no, no, nothing, nothing at all, in the village or I mean in the town either where I went to high school later. Not there, nothing. The bad experience and the wakening up came when, okay, we lived along the road, there was a road that led from a border town, Battonya, that's where the Russian tanks entered the country, again, because you remember the Second World War they entered the country from that town, that's where the first Russian soldier entered the country from, I mean entered the country during the war, in '44, and symbolically they entered the country from there again, I mean there again, okay. And I remember the rumble, the drumming noise of the tanks how they're approaching.

MT And the (road) went from Battonya to Budapest?

LV Yes, to Budapest, yes. And then somehow, okay, now I associate '56 also with these tanks, you see, but I didn't know what consequences it might have.

MT And they didn't shoot as they passed.

LV No, they did not, they did not, no, no, no. I remember that we were watching them from the window, and there were lines of tanks for hours and hours and hours, literally, literally, and then we knew it was over. And I remember there was one of the guys among the people who were playing cards, and people were discussing who would stay in power, and there was Nagy Imre, I remember his speech, and then I remember the radio, you know, we would listen to the.....

MT You did hear those speeches of Imre Nagy.....

LV Oh yes, yes, I remember his voice, too, you see, he had this funny cracking voice, "Radio Budapest", "Compatriots of Hungary", you see.....

MT You heard Nagy, did you also hear the Communists talk? Not Rakosi, but.....

LV Kadar. Kadar. Kadar.

MT But before Kadar.....

LV Oh, Gero, Gero, Gero, yes, yes, yes, I remember Gero, yes, yes, yes, I remember Gero and I remember that he spoke but I don't remember what he said, but I remember him speaking on the radio. And also I remember that they said at the beginning that "Keep your temper. Stay calm", you see, "Stay calm" which meant don't rise, don't rebel, you see, and things like that, the Communist announcements, you see, don't start a civil war, the country's at the edge of a civil war, you see, on the verge of a civil war, and these sort of things, you see. And then we the same dozen people were talking about these things and they were sort of speculating, who would stay in power, and many of them

said "Nagy Imre will", Imre Nagy, you see, "Nagy Imre will" and they were very enthusiastic, you see. I remember one of them, Mihail, his name was Mihail Anderiko, he was a very good-looking young man, tall, and he said that "No, no, no, I'm sure that he wouldn't stay in power" and people asked him why and who would stay in power and he said "No, no, the Russians wouldn't agree", you see, and then a few days later Kadar came, you see, and then they said oh this man must not, the people said, and then this man said "I'm sure he would stay in power", you see, this Mihail said again that he was sure that this Kadar would stay in power.....

MT Do you remember how people felt about Kadar?

LV They didn't like him, they didn't like him. No, no, no. Okay, I remember that too, that when this man said that Kadar would stay in power, people just went silent, yes, yes, yes, I remember the scene. Okay, we were playing cards and he was like putting down his cards and said I'm sure that Kadar would stay in power, you see, and people somehow stayed and they looked like they were constituting their cards, the same cards, you see, but I think there was more behind it. And then eventually he became the party secretary in the village too, you see.

MT But you all sort of knew that the gentleman who thought Kadar would stay became the.....

LV Yeah, yeah, somehow he felt confident, I think he realized that the Russians were stronger. I also remember that the Eisenhower message, you know about that?

MT Yes, yes.

LV That we pray for you. (laughter) And I remember how people reacted.

MT How?

LV Of course they said "Go to hell" and I don't want to say the dirty words but you mother fucker and so on, you see, that's what they said. But they had common sense and some of them said that Hungary was small, you know, a small bite. (laughter)

MT Did you all hear about the Suez Canal fiasco at the same time?

LV Yes, yes but I think it came in handy for the western powers because they could pretend that they didn't want to interfere.

MT Right. But what did you all.....

LV It was diminished by the Hungarian events, you see, but we did know that there were.....

MT You knew that it wasn't.....

LV No, no, no, somehow it was more important for us to listen to the messages on the radio because then the people started to leave the country. Not many people from our area left the country, I knew like one from our village who left the country, and another one who had been living already in Budapest, a second cousin of mine, left the country, that were the two people who I knew about that they left the

country but they were both considered as useless, idle, very lazy people.....

MT None of your immediate family, of course you children weren't old enough to, but your father didn't consider it.....

LV No, no, we never thought of it, never, it never occurred to my father, never, ever, no.....

MT I wonder why?

LV I don't know, we were too stuck, too much stuck to the place, to the land, you know, nobody in the family thought of it.

MT That's interesting. When you saw the tanks come you knew the whole.....

LV Thing was over, and I heard people say, you know, I didn't know, you know, I didn't know anything.....

MT Then of course it got worse, at least for a little while afterwards, the collectivization.....

LV Yes. I remember there were some writings on the walls, I remember at one place there was a writing on the wall that "We'll start again in March", you see, but even I felt that it was hopeless, you know.

MT Meaning, what was written was meaning they were going to go on again.

LV Yes, I mean the revolution, the revolution, they meant the revolution was crushed. I remember that when this man said that Kadar would stay in power, like one week later or so he was declared, this gentleman was declared the party secretary of the village and people turned away from him. And I remember how people said oh well don't speak openly and talk with him, you know, in his presence, yes.

MT And what happened, for example, with your father's work?

LV Okay, it was very interesting because then he went on working, and then the situation during the revolution got worse because food was rationed and we had to take the bread, I remember it was my father's duty to take the bread to the village from town and sometimes I had to go for it, you know, and I remember we always had one or two extra loaves of bread for us, that was a big thing, yes, and we didn't have to line up for bread, okay, because I remember people lining up for bread and for things and for food. And it was like for about two or three months that we had to line up for food and food was rationed. I don't remember that Christmas. Okay, I wanted to tell you that we were very curious to hear the messages from the road, and it was kind of sad to hear that people had left the country, you see, and then they sent messages like "I send this message to whoever" and bub-bub-bub and "We are fine, we are in Germany now and we don't know where we are going to live, we still don't know about kitchen" and so on and then they put on these kitschy songs, you know, tear-jerking, you know.

MT Now were these messages in writing?

LV No, no, on the radio, the whole radio program was like messages, messages, messages.

MT Really? And it was allowed?

LV Yes, yes, yes. It was like for one month, yes, before these things were banned. I think almost like to the end of November or so. Messages just poured in, you know. Thousands, well, about a quarter of a million people left the country, you see.

MT And it was hard, after the revolution failed, it was hard on the peasants, on the farmers.

LV Oh yes, because then the cooperatives started again, you see. And then again many of them were forced and they were afraid not to join the farms, I mean the cooperatives.

MT And how about your father? Could he continue.....

LV He did not, he did not.....

MT What did he do with the land that he.....

LV Yes, we were working on it for about two or three years and it yielded well, but then, they confiscated it, did not confiscate but they gave us some very very bad land somewhere else, actually we never went there for about ten years, it was just staying there because it didn't do anything, you see,.....

MT Was it that they traded your good land for this other land?

LV That's it, that's it.

MT Did your father continue as a carrier?

LV Yes, yes, yes, yes, and then, okay, he let this land stay there, he went there once and he saw it, there was nothing, not even grass, but that area now is very valuable because it is a national park area, it's one of the biggest, okay, what is it, the birds stop over, the migration birds stop over, it's in the southeast of Hungary, and now it's very famous.

MT Did he give that land to the government? How did it get to be a park?

LV No, no, we still have it, we inherited it from our parents and it's still there, it's part of the national park, yes, okay.

MT And what happened to you? When did you go to Budapest? Did you go to the university, were you allowed to?

LV Okay, I went to high school. I was very shy, extremely shy, you know, I don't know why. Every morning I went to clean the school, but I was a very good learner. Even though I never learned at home, I never sat down as such, I just wrote my homework, but I was a good learner. But I went to clean the school, and then I ran home, literally, I ran home, and then I washed a little bit, and then I ran, sometimes I raced to the train, because I took the train to and then I went to school there for four years, I was doing well at school. But I never

thought of going to the university. I think I thought I wanted to be a teacher or an actor, but I thought I was very skinny, I didn't know how to sing, I didn't have a nice voice and I was really sort of very shy.

MT What did you take in school, anything that was specially interesting?

LV I liked literature, I liked Oran Janos, especially the poetry of Oran Janos, or, I liked, okay, once I read by accident, okay, I liked to read because when I was watching the animals, you see, I read books, you see, yes, I had the time to read books, you see, we had cows and pigs and so on, and I had to go out with the animals, you see, grazing and I had to be there with them and I read books and I loved them, I loved books, yes.

MT Did you do any language study?

LV No I did not.

MT But you probably did stuff like math and history and Marxism.....

LV Okay, I'm not telling you the truth because we had to learn Russian and I liked Russian, I liked the language, yes, okay, and I remember the poems that we were taught, and I liked it. And then in secondary school, in high school, we had to learn Russian and English, but we didn't have a good English teacher, you see, because he didn't know much English. I remember when I was in the 4th year in high school I still wrote like "ve" instead of "we" (laughter) and I wrote like "hi" instead of "he", with a long "i" (laughter), so it wasn't much. And when I was about to finish, I mean, you know, I was in the 4th year in the high school, we had to decide what to do. One thing I knew for

sure, I didn't want to go to the army, because I was so afraid, I was shy, you know, I thought I wouldn't be able to run like the other boys did, I was very clumsy, very clumsy, you know, and I didn't know how to play good ball, you know, hand ball, football, I was very bad.

MT Was there conscription? Did you have to go to the army?

LV Yes, it was obligatory, it was compulsory, yes.

MT When you got out of the gymnasium?

LV Yes, yes, actually when you got out of the gymnasium or when you were 20, it changed then, because, how was it, I think it started, yes, exactly when I left school it started then that you were drafted right after gymnasium, before that it was.....

MT You were how old?

LV I was 18. And I was scared, I was really scared that I would have to go to the army. But somehow I-----no, it started two years later that we have to go to the army after we left secondary school, high school.....

MT For how long did you have to go to the army?

LV Two years. Because when I left high school I was not worried that I would have to go to the army right away, I knew that I had two years, you see, and since I didn't feel any, okay, I didn't know where to go,

what to do, I just went to work as a technician or something, I drove the thing, road works, you see I had to do this leveling and I don't know what you call it, survey, land survey, actually I put in an application to transfer to school, college, and I was accepted there but I didn't like it and I didn't go, I remember one of my cousins said that it was very mean of me to apply and then not to go because I took away somebody's place. You see, but somehow it didn't bother me.

MT But you did some land survey.

LV I did, I did, I worked for a company there where we did it.....

MT And you learned on the job.

LV Yes, yes, yes, yes, and then the danger of having to go to the army was approaching, you see, and there was two ways of it, either if you cannot help it, you see, or if you went to school where they trained artists like directors or singers, actors, painters, they were exempt from having to do army duty.

MT Why was that?

LV I don't know, yes, they were privileged people. This was a Communist.....

MT Was this an imitation of the Russian ballet, drama, music.....

LV Yes and all the art performers were like that, were treated as something exceptional, you see, which was good in a way, you see, because so art, it meant that art was something, you see, unlike now, when it's all business and money. Then these people were exempt from having to do army service.

MT So did you have to do army service?

LV I did not have to do army service because I applied to, really I didn't tell anybody because I was too shy to tell anybody that, you know, but I was so scared by the thought that I would have to go to the army that secretly I gave in my application to the drama school, you see, yes, and then I didn't tell my parents about it, I got up at night and I went out, I sneaked out, and then I tried to go somewhere where I was sure people wouldn't hear me reciting a poem or practicing a poem, you see, and I remember we had to have a list of 10 poems and 3 monologues but then.....

MT So you had to audition.

LV Yeah, I had to go to an audition, oh yes, they are very, now I know that they are really very very trying.....

MT Strict.

LV Strict, yes, very strict entrance exams.

MT Did you pass?

LV I did, because we had 3 stages, you know, 3 elementary rounds, and I did the first one, I lied when I had to come to Budapest, I lied that I, I don't know what I said, but I came to Budapest.....

MT That's when you came to Budapest.

LV Yes. And then, I didn't know where I was, and I had to go in, and I remember that there was this corridor we had to gather, the applicants, and then I went in, I had to go on a stage, I couldn't see the people who were there, and they asked me what I wanted to recite, and then I recited something, then they asked me to form a monologue from a play, and I did, you see, and then, okay, they announced who got through, yes, and I was really surprised because that day I was one of them, I think there were 3 of us who got through, and I was very surprised, because, finally we were, okay, we were 15 people accepted out of 1,585, you see.....

MT You must have been good.

LV Well, I don't know, I think I was, but I was so shy, really, I think it came through that I was so shy and then people felt sorry for me, or I don't know why I got through.

MT But I think sometimes when people are shy but they get on the stage they become somebody else.

LV Oh yes, actually it happened to me, a very very strange experience, okay, and that was the second elementary round, what we call it elimination, and then I remember that I was really worried how to get away from the village because, from work, you see, and then again I said something, and then it was two days, because we had to pass a

severe intelligence test, and then we had to have a rhythm test, you know, a very strict rhythm test, and then we even had to jump about, you know, yes, it was very strange, and then we had all kinds of tests, you know, they asked us questions how to answer, how to react, and then there was the professional part of it when we had to recite poems again, and then another monologue, and then I was really surprised that I got through because, they put us up in one room, I mean we were two of us in one room, okay, the school said, I mean the representative, the drama coach said, okay there was only one drama coach, you see, the national drama coach, state, that was the drama school, and I remember there was this voice who in the evening started practicing, ooooh ahhhhh, haaaahooo... ..(laughter)

MT What did you think?

LV Oh my, I said, well, why did I come here? I really, I thought I would not go there, for this audition, really I was all, like, absolutely intimidated, absolutely, and when I crashed, crushed, I don't know how to say it, and then, I remember that I didn't wait for the end of the, I didn't wait for when they announced who got through, I wasn't there because I hadn't eaten and I couldn't, you know, after eating I thought it's okay, and then I went to a small buffet and I was sitting there and waiting for my food and somebody came up to my table and said "Hey they are looking for you there" and it was one of the teachers, I didn't know who were there because I never saw them, they were sitting in the dark, you see, I didn't know who he was, and he said "Aren't you the one who was taking part in the audition?" and I said yes and he said "Oh they are looking for you" and I said "Why?" and he said "Because you got through." Oh, I remember I went there and then this boy was coming down the stairs who I was staying in one room with, coming down the stairs with others who didn't get through, and then I stopped him to apologize. (laughter)

MT That you made it and he didn't.

LV "I'm sorry, I'm awfully sorry". I was such a naïve boy, really, a very naïve boy. Yes.

MT So then how long was the drama school?

LV Okay, I went there for one year because at the same time I was accepted to the university, too, and I felt more comfortable at the university, but it saved me from having to go to the army, you see.

MT But what did you apply to the university in?

LV Literature, literature, to study literature. Yes, and linguistics, and that's when I took up English.

MT So you learned English at the university.

LV Yes, I studied some there, but all the people who were at that department had valuable conditioning, very, because they were children of diplomats and people, children, I mean kids, not children because they were 20 or 18, who had studied English at the secondary school, you see, or even before that, you see, they had learned English. I had learned English in the secondary school, but very little, very little.

MT What year did you go to the university?

LV I started in 1966, yes.

MT So you were a year in drama.....

LV A year and then I had to start my university studies. I didn't know that I wouldn't have lost my valid entrance exempt to the university if I had stayed at the drama school for another year, I should have tried it. I thought I would have lost it, you see, if I had stayed, so that's why I just switched, you see, schools. Because I think I had gotten over some of my shyness by the end of the first year, you see, and I knew by then, and I don't want to be, I don't want to sound big-headed, but I realized that I knew something, I had something that would have made an academic, you see.....

MT So you knew you could.

LV Yes, I could, yeah, yeah, yeah, I realized that I liked it, you see, I came to like it.

END OF TAPE

LVbe someone outstanding, I was not interested in career, I mean in making a big career, I was never interested in that.

MT But how did you know you would make it in the university?

LV Somehow I-----in the drama school?

MT No, I mean when you had switched to the university. You had learned that you could do drama, how did you know you could do.....

LV Okay, I gotcha. Somehow I felt so relaxed at the university, like, I, and by then when I thought I would surely switch to the university study, okay, okay, there were two reasons. I didn't like people's attitude in the drama school, you see, and I had a very very bad trainer or instructor in the drama school who cared only about people who had had some experience on stage, I think it was just absolutely wrong, he wasn't a pedagogue, you see, so I was unlucky with my trainer, teacher. And he told me "Oh you area very talented man, but this career needs a man who is able to use his elbows, who is able to be aggressive"

MT And who is perhaps ambitious.

LV Yes, and I was very modest, I think, yes, clearly, but he told me several times, he told the others, that's why I thought I knew something, because he told the others "Try to do it like he does". It was interesting because he never gave me any instructions, and I missed it, you see, and he never encouraged me directly, you know.....

MT He never complimented you or told you you were good.

LV Never, never, never.

MT But he told the others to watch you.

LV It happened one time, really, that he said "Try to do it like he does".

MT But you could be more comfortable perhaps in the university because there was perhaps less ambition, less push.

LV Ambition, yes, it was more thought, you see, yes.

MT Yes. You could be shy in the university.

LV Yeah, yeah, yeah, that's it. Okay, but when you are exposed, you know, when you are an actor you are exposed.

MT Right.

LV Absolutely exposed, that's your profession, you know. That one year did me tremendous good, I had gotten over my awkwardness, you see.

MT That was the major good of that year?

LV Yes. I still have my presence, you know.

MT And then when you went to the university, how did you like that?

LV It was nothing, it was like lukewarm water, you know, like water that's not cold not warm, nothing exciting, and it stayed like it, you see. So I didn't participate in these studies, so it goes, I did my duty, I did my exams, and that was all, you see, and for the first three years I had a hard time because I had to catch up with them, you see, so it was very hard. But I didn't see it hard, again again I think I got relaxed.....

MT You liked it?

LV Not really, not really, it was okay, it was okay, it wasn't bad, it was comfortable, we had a little good time, and, but I didn't especially like the university.

MT Well, did you like the subjects? Were you interested.....

LV Okay, I liked the history of the language, the history of the Hungarian language, I liked it, I liked it, yes, but I wasn't ambitious there. The teacher told me sometimes that I had very good senses for detecting things, you see, like in linguistics, you see, how some of the conjugations worked in the past, and I don't know it was really nice, the history of the language, like how the inflections were born, you know, and I liked that.

MT And you studied Hungarian and English.

LV Yes, Hungarian linguistics and literature and English.

MT Any other languages?

LV No, no, never, I wasn't ambitious.

MT Well, I thought maybe if you liked linguistics you would have enjoyed tasting other languages.

LV Oh well now, that's not true, because, okay, I studied French for two years, I studied German for two years, and I studied Russian then and I get by in these languages. But somehow English spoils you.

MT Why is that?

LV Because everybody speaks, whenever I met Germans they were happy to speak German, whenever I met Russian people oh they wanted to speak Russian I mean English with me, yes, okay, I have friends, you know, German friends and Russian friends who spoke very good English, you see, Polish friends who spoke very good English.....

MT So you could always speak English.

LV Yes. And Dutch friends, people from Holland, who speak brilliant English. So English spoils you.

MT Because everybody can speak it and you can get lots accomplished.

LV Yes, that's it. And my English is lots better than my German and Russian.

MT But that's not true of course of Hungarian, you don't find so many people who speak Hungarian.

LV That's the problem, yes, so we speak English usually.

MT And so what was the attitude----- I guess if you got into the university it was with so to speak state approval-----and that continued the period you were there-----

LV Yes.

MT Has there been any change since the fall of the Soviet Union and the change in the governments?

LV Okay, I'd like to go back to some time in 1968, okay, I was a regular university student and we had a good time in the university and then the invasion of Czechoslovakia came. And we were kind of sad, but I was quite mean because I thought, okay, why should the Czechish people succeed in getting out and we did not, you see, in a way, but I was very sad and we were very angry, by then I was really conscious of existence, and.....

MT Can you say what made you more conscious, politically conscious, I guess is what you're saying, is that right?

LV Yes. I think it just developed.

MT Just living.

LV Just living. Okay, so we were very sad and angry that we joined the Russian troops in invading Czechoslovakia. And we were sitting at the canteen one day and it happened and we said, you know, that we had so many marks, and how awful it was of us to join, and the Russians, what bastards they were, and there was a man among us, he was a good friend of mine, his name was Lajos , and he said, "Don't worry, don't worry, you don't have to be angry, it will come to an end very soon, it will come to an end." And I said "What?" And he said, "The Soviet Union, the Soviet Union will fall apart. Before the century goes out, you see." And we looked at him, you know, like this man is mad, this man is crazy, this man is a utopist or I don't know....."

MT This was before Gorbachev.

LV Oh yes, it was in 1968. It was before Brezhnev or during Brezhnev, I don't know, when it looked like concrete, you know, like force country, you see, like the Soviet Union. Nobody, nobody, you know, I mean common people like me, would have thought that the Soviet Union would fall apart, no, no. And I still admire that man, you know, when I see him I always tell him this story, "Lajos, you are a great man, you are my Nostrodamus". (laughter) Amazing!

MT Did he ever say why he thought that?

LV His major was history, and he just thought logically, you see. He thought all the great empires came to an end and what's more he knew

that it was a sort of false, it was based on false fury, you see, and false reality, you see, it was based on lies and just a moment of history gave it a chance to come into being, and he knew he bet logically why it should come to an end soon. But I don't think he meant it seriously that he knew it would come to an end before the century went out.

MT Maybe exaggerating, but it happened. He must have seen the inner contradictions in the system.

LV Yes, that's it, and analyzed the contradictions, you see. We knew the contradictions but we did not analyze it, what would happen, yes, okay, so it was very interesting, yes. And somehow these things built up, you know, because, okay, Kadar was a good politician, you see, he was a bastard but he was a good politician, yes. And he had this common sense, he was a pragmatist, you see, and, like we were allowed to go to the west, you know, travel to the west and then so we would think, many people were taken in by that, and it was true, he meant it, too, I mean Kadar meant whatever he did he meant it, you see, and he wanted to create a better life in this camp but he had no vision of getting out, of course, he had no intention of getting out, you see, a true believer I suppose, yes. And then that's how it happened.

MT But I wanted to ask you, what did you do after you graduated then from the university?

LV Okay, I was looking for a job and I wanted to work for the radio but they didn't hire me because the people with connections got the job and then I remember.....

MT By what connections? That means.....

LV Parents, parents, and then friends, ambitious people.....

MT It was still state-owned?

LV Yes. And then I wanted, partly I was ready to accept any job, really, okay, when I finished university I had 5000 forints, I got it from my parents, and I went abroad, I went to England, I hitch-hiked to England with five dollars (laughter) and the train ticket, the train ticket only to Hook of Holland, and then I spent that three months with a friend of mine, an English girl, we became very good friends at the university, and I am very grateful because her parents treated me like their child, and we are still great friends, yes. So that's how I went abroad. And then I spent the three months but I didn't know what I would do when I came back. I never cared, and I wasn't worried, I think I had the American style (laughter).

MT Is that the American style?

LV They very often sound like it (laughter). And then, okay, I came back, and I applied for a job, and I remember how the director at the school looked at me, you know I had longish hair, and she was a very conservative lady and this friend of mine said that I should go see this director, a woman director, and I remember she was sitting there and drinking milk, and she stopped drinking for a second and she said no with her head (laughter), but I didn't care, really, I didn't mind, I wasn't even offended, for a second it was bad, okay, and then I had worked for this workers' club as they say it, in Csesed there was a big big factory and it had a cultural center and I started to teach English there, you see. They invited me and then I went there and they were very nice to me, very very nice. I left the university in 1971 and I was teaching "Animal Farm" in 1973, which was a banned book, you know, yes, at that time, of course it was the Brezhnev era, you know, I was teaching it and it sizzled, you know, the students loved it, and I

would have been put in prison, I'm sure, if somebody had reported it, you see.....

MT But they loved it too much to report you.

LV Oh yes, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, they liked me, you know, they really liked me, and there was an officer in the group and he didn't report me, and he was there, amazing! So it was a very nice place, I worked there until 1988, I never had another job, really. And then they offered me a job at the University of Economics but I didn't want to change places. Some of my friends told me, "Are you crazy? You could go to teach at the university and make a career" but I said no, I feel fine there, people are very nice to me, why change?

MT And you liked teaching?

LV Yes, and I was paid all right. And I started to organize the whole thing, the language department there, and I did a good job, and then I went to work in America for three years.

MT Whereabouts?

LV California.

MT Whereabouts?

LV Orange County.

MT Orange County. Teaching?

LV No, no, no, I did a.....okay, I had my contractors' license exam there and I did tiling.

MT That's a switch.

LV Yes, that was a switch, yeah, but I liked it.

MT Good. You learn from switches.

LV Yes, yes, and then I was homesick all the time and I came back. And that's when they told us, at the culture center, that's where the big changes were, I wasn't here, I wasn't living in Hungary when the big changes were, I saw it all in America on television.

MT And when you came back was it what you expected from the television?

LV Not really, well, it was a big surprise, though, you see. When I saw on the American television that they mention that there might be free elections in Hungary, I said "What?", really. I was standing in the living room and I said "Do I hear right?", you know, because they reported as Mr. Pozsgay in the west still think a great man, I think of him as a great man, he said when the reporter asked him "What would happen?" he said, "Okay, if things don't go right then we have to have free elections", said Mr. Pozsgay, and when the reporter said "What if

the Communists lose?” and then he said “Then they would lose it, then they would have to give a chance to other parties.”

MT Is that why you think he’s one of the great men?

LV Yes, yes, because he said it, you know, and it was still the Communist regime.

MT He was facing the truth.

LV Yes, yes. He’s a great man, he’s one of the victims now I think because he would have deserved much more than he got from the changes, you see, yes, he’s not appreciated, no, too bad, I feel sorry for him because he was a very good man, a logical man, a humanist and so on. Okay, so when I came back I went to see these people in Csepel and they said, Hey, we want to give up the language department, would you like to take it over, and take it privately, and we have the clients here, you know, we have the clients there and like we have 40 groups there and so on, so we got it, they gave it to us, you see.

MT So that’s how you came to your present work.

LV Yeah, that’s right, that’s how I started the language school. We still have some 20 groups there, in that culture center, but now they all, activity and so on changed, you see, they don’t have so many, okay, they are not the culture center of a factory now, they are an independent theater and I don’t know what now, but we still work there.

MT The factory is I guess private now.

LV The factory, it became independent from the factory, and it's an independent institution.

MT But the factory itself is also independent.

LV Yes, it went to pieces. So then we moved to the city and we have the language school there and two other places.

MT And you didn't really have to get the language school started because it was already going.

LV Yes, so it was really good, yes, okay, at a small scale, not like now, because now we have like 500 groups, you see, and there we had.....

MT By groups do you mean classes?

LV Classes, yes, okay, classes. Yes, 500 or more, yes, it's a lot. We have about 160 teachers, yes, it's a lot. We have 3 owners, a friend of mine who came to teach in Csepel and I, when I left Csepel, when I went to America, he took over from me. And then another friend of mine, Kalman, and I, we are the 3 owners of the school. And it's okay. Now I'm sort of fed up with it. (laughter)

MT Really?

LV Yes, it's too much.

MT Where do you go to now?

LV Well, retired. (laughter)

MT How about politics?

LV Politics, I'm not interested in it, I mean, okay, I know that politics, okay, politics is the history of today, it will be history, okay? I'm very sorry about it, you know, I feel sad about it, because I think it's dirty, you see. Politics and the policy of countries is mostly something dirty.

MT Always, you think?

LV Always, with a few exceptions, and the exceptions make the rule. Just think of, I'm sorry, but think of

Interruption

I think policies of the countries, okay, they don't matter, okay, the policies of the big powers matter, and they decide our age, I think, yes, like Russia I mean the Soviet Union decided our fate for a long time and then America now unfortunately, it's a good thing that we are trying to unite against, I mean Europe is trying to unite against America. It's not the American people, don't misunderstand.....

MT No, no, I understand exactly what you mean.

LV But I think it's still, okay, politics are dirty, a dirty business.

MT And would you have any preference for the present regime as versus the previous, or the previous as versus the present, do you think? Do you think it's the same group ruling that ruled before, or is there really a difference?

LV I think it's, okay, it's a hard question. I think, okay, the politicians win because they want to win and they want to make it for themselves. It's very egotistical, the career of a politician is very egotistical, very much self-interest is involved, you see, and it's almost bullshit, you know, whatever they do, I think, is for themselves, I mean politicians as individuals.

MT What role do people have as, (coughing) I've got to get a drink of water.

(pause)

LV I think, I'm sorry, I think I believe in art more than in policies, you see, I mean political careers, you see. A friend of mine, she's a brilliant actress, I think she's one of the best actresses in Hungary, said in an interview once, and very clever of her, she says that artists is necessarily, has a broader mind than a politician because an artist has to see in a wider scope, has to see life in a wider scope than a politician is able to.

MT But what politicians do affects so many people.

LV That's it, that's the problem

MT And that's why I wonder about the voter and his or her role, if that isn't, if they do not have a lot at stake, a lot of interest.

LV Of course they have to try to interfere, of course, with, and they have to modify the interests, I mean the egotistical way of thinking of the politicians.

MT For actually the voters' self-interest.

LV Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, we are of course trying to, and sometimes I think, and that would be a good finishing I think, sometimes I imagine a country where there are no politicians as such, no parties, you see, I would like to have politicians without party interest and self-interest, you see. That would be very good, not to have parties at all, like in Switzerland perhaps, something like that, you know.

MT You can't find a politician or anybody else without self-interest.

LV No I don't think we can. (laughter)

MT But I wonder, for example, do you think there's any, just in the present situation, is there any longing for Communist times when things were not so difficult or maybe there was, education was free, medicine was free.....

LV Okay, okay, okay, that would be very narrow-minded, I think, and there are people who think that way, but I don't believe in capitalism, I think it is a necessary and oddly development of mankind, of the human race, and I hope it will develop into socialism but not that socialism that happened in Russia, you see, but I think some of the countries like Switzerland or Holland are on the right track, you see, yes. And I think that Marx was absolutely right, Marx was a great great man. He said that socialism has to win in the most developed imperialistic countries, yeah, that's what he said, that was the essence of his speech, you see, and I hope that mankind will be able to survive to fulfill them because then it would be all right, you see, but we have a saying that the gypsy had a horse and he wanted his horse to give up the habit of eating and the gypsy almost succeeded but one day before he managed the horse died. And I'm worried that mankind will come to that fate.

MT Do you think Hungary has a chance to live politically like the Netherlands or like Switzerland? Do you think this is something that may develop?

LV Yes, I think eventually it will. We are good learners. And not only learners, we are good initiators too, you know. We are very inventive, too.

MT Yes, and very good survivors.

LV We are good survivors. And I think that in a way, we try and we will get on a very human track, you know, a very human way, you know, to make our lives better. We are not that stupid.

MT All mankind are just Hungarians.

LV Well, okay, I heard about some statistics that the most logical people are the English, and it's probably true, studying their language, you see, because I think the language reflects logic, you see, the way of thinking, and the English language is amazingly logical, beautiful, such a beautiful development of mankind, beautiful formation of mankind, amazing, yes. And the Hungarian language is not bad, so that's why I think we are not too silly.

MT I have read the words of a great linguist who knew 27 languages and he said Hungarian was the most logical.

LV Oh really? No, I think English is more logical, but, on the other hand, every language has its logic, you see.

MT Yes.

LV Yes. It's beautiful. So, mankind may not be hopelessly bad, you know.

MT Hopefully, hopefully. I think of what, when people, you know, reject Marx because of Lenin and Stalin, really, I think of my history teacher in Berkeley who said, "Just because Marx said it doesn't mean it's wrong".

LV That's it, absolutely. I think his reputation got spoiled by Stalin and Lenin, and by the imperialists, you see, because they did it on purpose. It's like people say that the cars that don't use gas, I mean petrol, have been invented but the oil industry wouldn't let those cars be produced, you see, because of their self-interest, yes, that's right, okay, and I think the imperialists treat Marx like that.

MT Right, right. Well, listen, I won't keep you longer but thank you very, very much, Lajos

LV Thank you, it was really a pleasure. I'm sorry for talking so much nonsense!

MT Not at all, it wasn't nonsense, it was fascinating. Thank you.

LV Okay. Thank you.