

An Interview with Jeno Eder

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

Interviews conducted by
Virginia Major Thomas
in 2007

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Discursive Table of Contents—Jeno Eder

Family, education, and army and POW experiences—life and work under Communism—1956 Revolution and after—travel under Communism—becoming a guide—experiences as a guide—changes after 1989—Hungary today—pride in being Hungarian and speaking Hungarian—his father’s actions in 1944

Biography

Although the son of a German father and Slovakian mother, with Slovenian ancestors, Jeno Eder is very proud to be Hungarian and very proud of Hungary. The men in his family worked for the railroad, where his father played a brave role during the Nazi army invasion in 1944. He however was employed, after leaving the Hungarian People’s Democracy army, as a technical worker producing military equipment made to Soviet design. Later he worked in telecommunications economic research. But his true calling was guiding tourists, which he was trained to do and began in 1986. He was a guide in Hungary as well as abroad and had many revealing experiences. He relates these and also makes many comments on life today in Hungary.

Circumstances of Interview

Jeno Eder was referred to the interviewer by the collaborator and translator Miklos Jakabffy. Both being guides, they had known each other for some years. Jeno Eder came over to the apartment the interviewer was renting for the interview, and the purpose of the oral history was explained to him by the interviewer at that time and the legal permission form signed. He was very forthcoming and cooperative, and Miklos Jakabffy translated.

Editing of the Interview

The interview was lightly edited by the interviewer/transcriber to omit accidental repetitions and occasional grammatical errors. It was then sent electronically to Jeno Eder for his editing. Two months later a deadline was suggested for the editing process, and when no changes were made in the transcription submitted for editing, the interview was placed in Bancroft Library and online.

Thomas: This is Major Thomas on the 23rd of November, 2007, and I am at Csorsz utca 5 in Budapest, Hungary, and we are interviewing Jenő Eder, and first we'll ask you where you were born, and when, and a little bit about your family.

Eder: I was born May 3, 1926 in Budapest. My parents were divorced when I was 9, I stayed with my father, his name was Jenő Eder as well, and we lived in Avar utca where I live now. The house where we used to live and where I live now was built in 1910. My father's parents built that house. My grandfather passed away in 1910 when the house was ready. My grandmother was left a widow with 2 sons, the elder was Oszkar after my grandfather, and as my grandmother's name was Eugenia, that became Eugene or Jenő in Hungarian. I went to the elementary school which was destroyed in World War II during the bombardment. Then I went for the first year to the same high school where my parents went, it was the Rakoczy high school. For the second year of high school I went to the Piarist high school in Mosonmagyaróvár. I started in 1937 and graduated from high school in 1944. My mother's name was Ida Kozsuh Sugar, she was a teacher.

Thomas: What did your father do?

Eder: Father did the same job as his father and his father, so my grandfather and my father worked for the Hungarian state railroad. My father's grandfather worked for 25 years at the Hungarian state railroad and then retired. My great-grandfather was born in Slovenia it is now, at that time part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.

Thomas: What was his training after he graduated from high school?

Eder: After I graduated from high school in Mosonmagyaróvár I came back to Budapest and attended the university medical faculty.

Thomas: What was the year? Was it still during the war?

Eder: It was September 1944. At that time I lived on the Buda side with my mother and I was listed into the army. My uncle Oszkar was the deputy commander of Budapest air defense. I was listed into the same unit, the air defense unit, and the unit left Budapest in December 1944 before the Russians had encircled Budapest. That was actually Christmas '44.

Thomas: So he was not here during the siege. Where was he?

Eder: First we were next to Győr, later on at Sopron. The unit left the border in the first days of April, and we marched towards Germany, towards Bavaria, through Austria, and we became POW's at Pocking at the river Inn and we were in a camp in Bavaria. As it was an American camp, those who arranged work for us allowed us to work outside the camp, and with a few pals I got to work with the peasants in Bavaria, and our advantage was that we got food

from the peasants and the advantage for the Americans was that we were not consuming their supply. We had a good supply, the same food as the peasants. The Americans returned us to Hungary Christmas 1945. Then I continued my university studies. As the Communists were more in power, by 1950 I could not continue my studies because of my political views.

Thomas: How did the Communists---they investigated him?

Eder: I was talking too much, and just my book of attendance had been withdrawn. As my universities studies were actually stopped, then I was listed into the Hungarian People's army in '51. As the political officer declared me unreliable, saying I had western ideas, I requested them to put me out of the army.

Thomas: Let me ask, did Hungarian men his age have to go in the army under the Communists?

Jakabffy: It was mandatory, yes.

Eder: Yes, I was listed in the army, although I had already served in the army, and although I was not a Communist party member I was listed into the Hungarian People's Democracy army. I was just a soldier, before I would have left the army my rank was sergeant.

Thomas: Where did you go?

Eder: In Transdanubia and in the western part of Hungary. Just to mention, the general office of our unit was in the ducal palace of the Festetics in Keszthely. I married my wife in November of '52 and I left the army in December of '52. After the army I found a job at the Csorsz utca Hungarian Optical Works. By January 1956 I had a short period workplace at a Mechanical Chain Company producing chains, and by '57 I was employed by another mechanical company.

Thomas: What was life like after he got out of the army, what was life like in Hungary before '56 under the Communists? Was it just go to work and then come home and go to sleep, or was there something, was there terror, were there restrictions in everyday living? What was life like?

Eder: After the army, the children were born in '59 and '60. Our favorite entertainment was attending visiting opera performances, sometimes theater or a movie.

Thomas: This is a man who was outspoken before.

Eder: At the Hungarian Optical Works it was military equipment production and I was the quality end controller. At the Fine Mechanical Works I was in

production planning. There was also military production at that company, mostly locators were produced there, anti-aircraft radio locators. They were all produced by Soviet plans, designs. The income anyhow and anywhere was small, just enough for the everyday life.

Thomas: Was there a difference between life before '56 and life after '56?

Eder: Before the 1956 Revolution the economy, financial and the general situation was much worse than after the Revolution, meaning not only the finances and the economics but people were withdrawing and withholding in talking or speaking or conversing with anybody else before '56.

Thomas: And that changed after '56?

Eder: We had hopes that the changes would happen promptly after the Revolution, but the general situation was even worse after the Revolution had been taken under control, as they put it.

Thomas: Meaning they couldn't speak or didn't have more freedom, it didn't get better?

Eder: Yes. In 1957 everyone was more frightened of speaking or talking freely.

Thomas: But your work continued without any interruption?

Eder: Yes. As I saw there was no chance for the Revolution to succeed, I was absolutely not involved in the events. It was a small factory Mechanical Chain Company where I worked and there were no events there, and I didn't want to take part in the events as I saw them as no chance. The western leading powers were busy with the events in Suez. It was not difficult to realize that such a small country as Hungary which has been thrown over to the eastern powers was of no interest. The 200,000 refugees who successfully left the country to go west were accommodated in the western hemisphere and they were given housing and work, but that was all.

Thomas: Did life get better gradually? More food?

Eder: The situation as the tension eased, the economic situation improved, and Hungary became the legendary happiest barrack of the east bloc.

Thomas: Were you happy?

Eder: I had happy days as well as less happy days. Then in '86 I retired.

Thomas: Did you work at the same place all the time?

- Eder: From '72 I worked in the research institute of the telecommunication, it was the economic department where we prepared different estimations. Before I was retired I studied for a year to be a guide in German. By that year I was active as a German-speaking guide for 17 years, beginning in May '86 I started guiding, and those were the best years of my life.
- Thomas: He was guiding who going where?
- Eder: I was guiding Hungarians, Germans, Swiss, Czechoslovakians, all using the German language, also Japanese or Chinese using the German language and another guide translated into their language. I guided foreigners in Hungary, and I guided Hungarians in Austria, Czechoslovakians, Poland and in both Germanys, east and west.
- Thomas: And this is in '86, and by that time Hungarians could travel.
- Eder: First I got a western travel permit in 1963 with my wife. The two children were left at home as hostages. I just want to add that the most tiring were the Japanese because one always had to bend over, put their hands together before waiting and saying 'thank you'. (laughter)
- Thomas: First he could travel with his wife and later on he was a guide?
- Eder: I did travel with my wife to both east and west during Communism as well.
- Thomas: What differences did you notice when you traveled between where you traveled and things at home?
- Eder: There were no major differences in life between Hungary and Poland. There were certain things or standards that were better in one of the two countries, better supply of goods, but major differences did not exist. With the Poles we could never figure out who were more hated, the Germans or the Soviets. When I tried to talk to the Poles in German without identifying myself first as a Hungarian, they almost spit at me. As they recognized me as Hungarian, we were immediately expected to drink together as brothers.
- Thomas: We had a similar experience in Greece when we spoke German. Now he said that these were the best years of his life, after '86 when he started guiding. Why were these so great?
- Eder: Although neither of my parents' origin was Hungarian, I identify myself as Hungarian. My father was German, Eder is an Austrian name, and my mother was Slovakian, so I was very happy to show much of my beloved country to visitors. On my father's side one of my great-grandmothers was a Tomasini, Italian.
- Thomas: So there was a fair amount of people visiting Hungary, in the '80's?

- Eder: I was very lucky that our professors in the guide school were great people and we had a high level of education and I was very happy to travel in Hungary as well as abroad.
- Thomas: And what did the education consist of? history, language of course, what else?
- Eder: How to guide, geography, history of art, and politics of course.
- Thomas: Did you learn things about Hungary you had not known before?
- Eder: I was not as good in folk art. I was good at art history, I had knowledge but in the guide school it was reinforced.
- Thomas: It sounds as if you weren't too unhappy to retire. It sounds as if the guiding was more interesting to you than your previous work. What was different in your life after the change in '89?
- Eder: In my guiding work there was no basic change. Before the change I wasn't speaking as openly about politics as after the change, that is in my work. The change meant for one thing that one had more free feeling.
- Thomas: Could you travel more?
- Eder: Everything that I did in my life I tried to make the best of it. When I see a foreign tourist bus I have a special kind of feeling, that's how happy I was a few years ago when I was guiding tourist buses.
- Thomas: Getting down to particulars, did you enjoy the traveling.....
- Eder: He hasn't finished his story. After the change he had a group from the military technical institute employers traveling to western Europe, Hungarians traveling to Austria. The first night on the road we spent on the Hungarian side of the Hungarian-Austrian border. The group members were enthusiastic about how beautiful that part of Hungary was. It is a nice part of Hungary. There were 4 people in one room, I didn't sleep because one person was coughing, one was going in and out, I didn't get much sleep. Very nice people, all of them were engineers. One of them was a political informer, one of the others told me this. I was obviously informed about the road and way in Austria. I was smiling inside at how astonished the group members were at the beauty of the place where we were because I knew where we were going. These people were astonished at the neatness and order and the cleanness of the well-kept houses that they saw through the bus windows, the number of the cars parked before the houses in the villages and the private machinery at farmers' places and flowers in the windows, and the makes of the cars were not east-block makes. At the very beginning they didn't dare to talk to each other, they were just looking. Slowly they got more and more enthusiastic.

When I was younger, before the war, I was twice in Graz for summer vacation, so I knew what was waiting for us there. Graz is a typical attractive Austrian small town. I remember well that Furtwangler lived there in the same street where I lived in '38. The same architect office built the opera of Graz which built several theaters in Budapest. In the downtown parish church of Graz, for example, there is a Tintoretta painting. Graz has one of the largest 18th century armories in Europe. The entire little town is charming, the layout, the location, not the Danube but the Mura River on the left hand side. My passengers were astonished that the people on the street and the everyday life were much more easy, relaxed, happy, than what they had seen in Hungary. There was a lot of shopping done by the tourists, food, mostly chocolate, and some minor technical goods. They didn't tell me but I realized that they were very much disappointed in what they expected and what they found, because they had expected, as the Communist propaganda had said, a much poorer people and a much poorer life on the other side of the border.

- Thomas: Had they begun to talk to each other and among themselves and be more open?
- Eder: These people were trained by the Communist ideology that we have a much better life than those on the western side. We had during Communism everything better. They did believe that in the west people were poorer, so the dressing was absolutely different.
- Thomas: What happened to the spy?
- Eder: He was an average person, he didn't act in any way that anyone would have concluded that he was a political informer.
- Thomas: But was he as surprised by what they found in the west?
- Eder: He was the exception because he had been to the west earlier. Two of the members of the group had been to the west earlier. All the members of the group were engineers so they were educated. It was quite an experience for me to see them realize that there could be another kind of life elsewhere than in the east bloc, they had probably traveled before in the east bloc.
- Thomas: Part of his enjoyment of guiding these people was seeing them discover what the world was like?
- Eder: Yes. I had the same kind of experience guiding visitors from the west here in Hungary who were astonished that the people here in Hungary also had white skin and two eyes and one nose and so forth. At breakfast I had a complaint from a Dutch tourist that he poured milk into his tea and the milk got sour in the tea. I asked him, "Did you first put lemon in your tea?" He said "yes". We were sometimes also astonished because we expected western tourists to have more knowledge and experience in general.

- Thomas: What was particularly surprising to westerners when they came after the changes?
- Eder: I have seen mostly that my guests were pleasantly surprised at what they found here. The simplest example is that goulash is a soup here but a stew in the west. It was always necessary to explain this difference to everybody. Many westerners call the fish soup of Hungary, which is a separate traditional Hungarian meal, they just simply call it goulash made with fish.
- Thomas: What changes have you seen since '89 in society here? Have you seen, for example, more openness in expressing opinions?
- Eder: On the state television or radio one understands that everyone speaks openly. On the other hand, on certain other stations one can hear commentaries or statements that, on the evidence we have in mind, we would immediately think that those people would be taken to jail for what they say. Not now, but they speak so openly now, this wouldn't have been dreamed of before the changes.
- Thomas: Do you think that the changes in '89 were mostly positive or negative or mixed?
- Eder: I am one-sided, I can't be objective, I only see good things about the changes. What couldn't have been dreamed of before the changes, that in a light TV comedy show, the commentator takes a framed picture of the prime minister and the camera shows him spitting on the glass into the face of the prime minister and then taking a rag and wiping it off as if he did it to clean the glass. Such an expression of opinion would not have been tolerated before the changes. Others make jokes about the present prime minister's having a big nose. That wouldn't have been dreamed of earlier.
- Thomas: I hear however that there is such a lot of conflict between present political points of view that it doesn't help improve the country. Have you had that experience?
- Eder: The country is actually really divided into two parts, but for me I cannot understand those who were formerly on the Communist, the leftist side, who still are on that side and do not dare admit that they are wrong. That is one part. Another half of the leftist side appreciates the recent government because they have financial advantages, they get good business, a good income.
- Thomas: Do you think there are very many people who want to go back to the old system, that the parliamentary system doesn't work?
- Eder: I don't think that many would like to go back to the Communist system. The educated part of society definitely doesn't. Some would like to have the

higher living standards of 5, 6, 7-8 years ago, when people had a higher standard of living than in the recent 3 or 4 years.

Thomas: So in some respects it's gotten more difficult in the last 5 years.

Eder: Yes.

Thomas: Does he want to hazard a reason for that?

Eder: There are 2 reasons. In the last 4-5 years they are only interested in making more money, to get more benefits for themselves and for their followers, and also they do not have any experience and knowledge of what to do and how to continue, which way to go. Just an example, the ministry of industry and commerce is a graduate of the medical university. We cannot guess how good he would be as a doctor because he never worked as a doctor.

Thomas: So there is no question that there is a need for a better leadership.

Eder: Yes. Our foreign secretary is a psychologist. The former minister of health who was thrown over in the old coalition government was an ear-nose-throat doctor. He was fired for having failed in three hospitals earlier, then he became the minister. To show how good a doctor he was, he was to operate on an innocent child's right ear and he operated on the left ear.

Thomas: I must say he is well-informed about the background of these government ministers. Is everybody as well informed as he is?

Eder: It is likely because everything is in the print media. The question is, who is interested, because there is only one paper which writes about----we have only 2 papers, one is the so-called middle class newspaper and the other one is the Hungarian language international geography!

Thomas: But are people concerned enough and do they understand they need to find out what's going on and get involved? act? Do the Hungarian people feel like they must be active in politics, find out what they need to know, vote, throw the rascals out if they're rascals----is it an active scene or just a passive one, take what comes, can't change it.....

Eder: I think people are interested. You can see what happens these days. Every day there is a permanent demonstration against the government, in certain places of the country or in different places in the country. Yesterday it was just a general strike all over the country. Actually we cannot speak about strikes in Hungary because the last serious strike was in 1956, when it was the Revolution. It hasn't happened in Hungary probably yet in its history that the railroad stopped operation for 6 hours.

- Thomas: We hope that under the present system that it won't come to the bloodshed of '56. Hopefully it's possible to change the government or what's happening without bloodshed, that's supposedly what democracy is about, that people can act and determine their government instead of taking up arms against it.
- Eder: We had not anticipated that democracy is about who can lie bigger before elections and fool the people.
- Thomas: Well, there is also the expression "truth will out". Do you have that saying?
- Eder: The question is, when?
- Thomas: It takes a long time. It takes a while. It's not an efficient, quick system, democracy.
- Eder: I can't remember who said it, probably Churchill, that democracy is not a good system but better has not happened.
- Thomas: Yes, that was Churchill, and that's true. I don't want to keep him too long. Is there something I should ask him or that he wants to say?
- Jakabffy: We haven't spoken about the fact that his son has lived for decades in Switzerland and his daughter in Hungary.
- Eder: In '78 my son went for a summer vacation with a friend to Bulgaria, and we were astonished when we got a postcard from Trieste, Italy, where he got through Yugoslavia and left the east block illegally, and we had no knowledge at all about his plan, only tension.
- Thomas: Was he put in jail?
- Eder: At my workplace, the so-called political personnel department head of department was just the opposite of the average existing in the east block, he was a very very exceptionally nice person, it was already a surprise that he got his position because his wife was also sent to Siberia by the Russians so he was obviously not on the Communists' side. So when I got the postcard from my son, I immediately went and told him the situation, and he did not initiate anything against me and us. My son succeeded in getting to Switzerland from Italy. He got some help from the Hungarian Jesuits, one was a well-known opposition person of the clergy in the Vatican at that time. And my son luckily found an industrious person who had a factory in Zurich and he got a job there. He was lucky also because later he found his daughter and later they married, but my son is quite stupid because they were divorced. The funny side is we are very good friends with the family, last week my wife had a birthday and the other parents-in-law were congratulating her.
- Thomas: But his son liked the Swiss political system?

- Eder: My son liked Switzerland and we had no troubles because he was there.
- Thomas: But when his son was in Switzerland before the changes, could they communicate readily? Could he come back and see them or at least telephone?
- Eder: For a few years our correspondence was through a friend of mine, his daughter married an Italian and actually we did use their mail to correspond, at the beginning that was the safe mail, and later on we corresponded directly.
- Thomas: Is the son still there?
- Eder: Yes, he settled there.
- Thomas: What makes Jenő Hungarian? Didn't he say his ancestors were Slovenian?
- Eder: I don't know what makes me Hungarian. This country, this language, these surroundings make me Hungarian. I can only refer to Edward Teller who spoke as good Hungarian as you or me, after many decades of living in the U.S., he always referred to himself as Hungarian. There were some nuclear scientists and it was the beginning time of nuclear developments and nuclear guns and so forth, and they started a conversation, and after a while, one of them said, "We could easily speak Hungarian instead of using English".
- Thomas: Because there were so many of them! It's very interesting, there have been so many physicists, nuclear scientists, so many musicians, from Hungary, and I wonder what it is in Hungary that has produced so many musicians and scientists, is it a special school that has trained them?
- Eder: The mixture, the Hungarians are a mixture of Germans, Slovenians, Slovaks, Italians. The reason Nobel prize-winners from Hungary are all living outside Hungary is that they were born inside Hungary from different parents.
- Thomas: But they're not only born in Hungary, they also received their training here. I think there is something formative in that. They go to the west to make a living.
- Eder: I have a good friend at school, a classmate, who as a Jew was in the concentration camp of Bori, it is in Yugoslavia, and he now lives in the United States, in California, in Santa Barbara, and he calls me on the phone every Hungarian holiday. There is another story: another classmate, with whom I attended 4th grade in elementary school, called me on my 70th birthday, he did remember that our birthdays were next to each other, and as I was 70 I was working and guiding, as I returned home my wife said listen, this guy was calling, and I said "I don't know this name unless it was a school mate of mine 60 years ago exactly" and she said that's who it was, where is he, I don't know anything about this man. And I said yes, it is he, he is calling from the

United States, and she said he will call you again in the evening. I think this confirms that having lived 50 or whatever years in another country he kept his Hungarian identity. He has only a very faint Hungarian accent. Some left only 2 years ago and can hardly speak Hungarian now!

- Thomas: Anything more you would like to say? You have lived through some very monumental events!
- Eder: Maybe my father's story as he worked at the Hungarian National Railway in the airport on the night of March 18-19, 1944, when the Nazi army overtook Hungary. My father called the home secretary that the special train of the governor of Hungary, Horthy, was not permitted to travel from Hungary to Germany because all the network available was used by Nazi military trains from Germany to Hungary. My father wanted to paralyze the Hungarian railway and send all the engines available out to the open tracks where they got red lights and actually paralyzed the network for stopping the German railway access. Later the Nazis did try to investigate this but my father was lucky because the Nazis started that investigation at my father's boss who was a good pal and he put my father in the countryside in a fire station where he was not to be disturbed.
- Thomas: That is quite a heritage to live up to. What his father did was such an example.
- Eder: It was a hot situation. It was not too much to do, because the Nazis did not arrive only from the German direction but from the south, from the Yugoslavian direction too and from Romania also. He had no knowledge of what was going to happen, because the premier of the country was in Germany, he was not held by mistake but was invited by the Fuhrer and the head of the army together. It was well-planned.
- Thomas: He was very brave. Thank you for his contribution. And thank you for your translation, Miklos, Thank you so much.

[End of Interview]