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András Bozóki from Hungary

About



was born in 1959 in Budapest, Hungary. He is a graduate of Loránd Eötvös University in Budapest where he received a degree in Law and Government, and MA in Sociology. In 1992, he received a PhD in Political Science from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. He has lectured at several universities abroad including Columbia University, Smith College, Tübingen University, Nottingham University, Stockholm-Södertörns University, and the European University Institute. He is the author and editor of several important academic books on democratisation, the history of anarchism, the role of intellectuals, and the Hungarian round table talks. In 1989 he participated in the Hungarian national round table talks as a negotiator representing the Opposition Roundtable. At that time, he was also the spokesperson for the Alliance of Young Democrats (Fidesz). As well as this, he has also served as an advisor to the Prime Minister of Hungary (between 2003 and 2004). From 2005 to 2006 he was the Minister of Culture. Currently, he is Professor of Political Science at the Central European University in Budapest.

photograph: Anna Györfly

An interview

with András Bozóki

Can you tell me a bit about your first trip to the West?

It was a trip my parents and I took to Greece in 1976. We went there by car, through Yugoslavia.

When did you have to apply for a visa the first time?

I had to do that in 1980. My girlfriend and I wanted to travel around Western Europe by train. In the end we travelled for 30 days around England, Scotland, France, Switzerland, Germany, Austria, and the Benelux countries. To get a visa one simply had to join a queue at the cash desk, and pay for it. That was real torture though, as the wait was very long. The consular officers were kind and helpful, but the whole process was slow and tedious. There were others like me too, who wanted to visit many countries: Austria, West Germany, France, England, the Netherlands... To obtain all the visas for a single journey one needed a whole month. It was extremely wearisome.

I did not feel a lack of goodwill on the part of the consular officers involved. I think the biggest problem was that there were not enough windows to serve us so the service was rather inefficient. To get all the visas one needed, one had to start applying well in advance of one's journey. When one's departure was planned for July, one had to start in, say, February.

Do you have any memories of crossing a border into the West for the first time?

Going to Greece – I knew that this country was not a typical Western country – we crossed the southern border with Yugoslavia. We travelled by car. Our passports were checked and then we were signalled to go through without any further ado. When we entered Greece, I was struck by how colourful everything was; there were colourful signs everywhere. Watching that explosion

of colours, of advertisements, one could feel capitalism in the air, so to speak.

What were your impressions of your second trip to the West?

We went to Vienna first, but did not find it interesting. Then we went to Switzerland – Bern and Lausanne. I can remember standing there in awe. The tidiness, exactness, and wealth impressed us enormously. Next, we visited Paris and discovered what a cosmopolitan city it really is; people from all these different ethnic groups were everywhere. And then all these famous buildings: Notre Dame, Sacré-Coeur, and the Eiffel Tower. All these numerous cafés... All the things that we had only seen in films or read about in magazines were there, in front of our eyes.

Did they match all your expectations?

Well yes, because I had read all about them before I went abroad. I already had some knowledge about the sights I was seeing. Of course, they looked different in real life. I really liked Paris and London, and especially their streets, teeming with life, their bookshops so well stocked, and their artists, performing on the street.

Once in Greece – In Thessalonica – we went to a record store. I wanted to buy a Santana LP thinking that they were going to have only one or two of them. I was really amazed to discover that they had not one but ten of them.

Did you learn anything about Western democracy or the free market economy abroad?

I had my first encounters with the free market economy in Greece: the plethora of colours, the ability to bargain for any fruit we wanted to buy. They were all expressions of freedom, the likes of which I had never experienced in Hungary. As for democracy, I had my first lesson in democracy in London, when I saw policemen patrolling the streets unarmed. We asked them for some directions, and they helped us readily and in a polite manner. It was a great surprise to us. In Hungary the policemen were like thoughtless robots. And then, there was Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park. One was allowed to speak freely about anything one wanted to. In fact, one was free to speak one's mind not only at

Speakers' Corner but also anywhere else in London. I think that when you compare England to the US the latter is even freer. But at the same time, when you are in the States you have to be more alert because Americans are more prone to mind their own business. In Western Europe I felt a safety net of sorts, whereas in the States you were expected to be more self-reliant.

What impact did your travels have on your life and career?

I think, if I hadn't had the opportunity to spend some time in Western Europe, my attitude and my personality would have been a bit different. The scholarships I was granted, like the Soros Scholarship that provided me with an opportunity to spend six months in Los Angeles (between 1988 and 1989), had a profound impact on my subsequent career and my way of thinking. Apart from Los Angeles, I spent half a year in Vienna (between 1990 and 1991), three months in Nottingham (in 1993), and one year in Berlin (between 1993 and 1994). Next, I spent three months in England and two in the Netherlands (both in 1998). Finally, I spent a year, each, in Massachusetts (between 1999 and 2000), and in Florence (between 2000 and 2001).

Were you there in a professional capacity?

Yes, I was. But all my experiences as a professional also enriched my life in general. In the end, I can proudly say that I have not only had opportunities to study or work in six different and interesting countries but also that my stays there were quite extensive. This allowed me not only to gather simple impressions but also profound knowledge and understanding.

You must have made new friends, acquaintances, and connections while you were abroad. What impact did these have on your life?

They influenced my life a great deal. I created my Facebook account, and I already have 700 contacts – most of them foreign. Thanks to the Internet one can renew and maintain old relationships, one can meet these people in person while abroad, or they can visit you. As to whether I profited, or not, let me say this: I am now teaching hundreds of international students at the Central European University in Budapest. I think that speaks for itself.

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Queuing is a constant element of the visa-application process.
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