STEFAN BATORY FOUNDATION

Europe Divided
Then and Now

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Visegrad Fund

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Then and Now

Stefan Batory Foundation, Warsaw
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Introduction

The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia acceded to the Schengen Agreement in December 2007. The closing of the border-crossing points involved provoked many to point out the exceptional significance of this event. Some saw in this one of the last stages in the healing of divisions in Europe. In practice, inhabitants of the CEE countries can now travel with ease the likes of which they had never known before; they are enjoying opportunities that many of them could not even have dreamed of.

One can assume that inhabitants of the Visegrad countries will soon take the lack of checks and clearances at the EU internal borders for granted. Similarly, the majority of them got used to the facilities introduced earlier very quickly. First, they did not need visas for West European countries. Next, they could go there without a passport – with just an ID. And now, there are no borders to speak of.

The opposite is true of those living in Eastern Europe though. Citizens of countries such as Belarus, Moldova, Russia, or Ukraine find visiting the EU, and especially Visegrad countries, increasingly more difficult. The enlargement of, first, the EU, and then, the Schengen Zone, involved the tightening of controls at the new EU external borders, and at the same time of the visa regime followed by the new EU Member States vis-à-vis their Eastern neighbours. The inhabitants of East European countries encounter more and more difficulties in this respect: higher costs of obtaining a visa, stricter requirements to be met, etc. For many of them, travel to the EU is beyond reach now.

Thus, this healing of divisions is not tantamount to the end of the division of Europe as such. Our publication shows that this division is both the problem of the past, and of the present. Therefore, the book is divided into two parts: "THEN" and "NOW". Both of these parts deal with the problems encountered by Europeans in connection with travelling. The problem is discussed though within the context of two different periods and two separate geographical areas.

The first part ("THEN") is our attempt to remind some people and to show others what it was like to travel to Western Europe before 1989 or just after that watershed date for those who used to live in Czechoslovakia, Hungary or Poland. To that end, we asked 15 individuals from the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia to share with us their experiences in this regard. Our interviewees were persons that had achieved a lot in their lives – authorities in their respective fields, prominent figures. They included those involved in science, culture, and arts, ex-anti-communist opposition leaders, and post-transformation politicians.

The interviews presented below contain stories about the difficulties involved in organising a trip to the West and obtaining all the necessary documents; one had to overcome many obstacles that were raised by both one's own Soviet Block country, and the Western country involved.

Our interviewees recounted their experiences relating to the very crossing of a border, checks and clearances involved, the treatment accorded to them by the authorities of both their own country and the foreign countries involved. One of the recurrent themes is the experience of being looked down upon, of being stereotyped, of being considered to be a second-class citizen by the authorities and inhabitants of Western countries.

Apart from the difficulties with obtaining the necessary documents, our interviewees talk a lot about the impressions and feelings that accompanied their first trips to the West. The majority report the enormous astonishment, the sense of being overwhelmed, and the feeling of freedom. When the initial astonishment faded away one was able to acquaint oneself with the West and make comparisons. The majority of our interviewees noted the differences between political and economic systems, and the standards of living and degrees of consumerism. Priority is, however, given by them to the differences in the social sphere, in relations between people. For example, Miroslav Kusý notes, "their freedom of expression and the openness of their public discussions contrasted sharply with the rigidity of our system and the closed society we had been living in for already forty years."

Nearly everyone stressed how important it was to be able to visit the West back then, especially because one had the opportunity to look at certain issues from a broader perspective, to acquaint oneself directly with the workings of democracy, the free market economy, civic society, etc. Thus, trips to the West profoundly affected not only our interviewees' private lives but their professional careers as well.

The second part ("NOW") is devoted to the problems stemming from, and relating to, the lack of freedom to travel as encountered by inhabitants of Eastern Europe today. We decided to present this issue relying on visual materials. Thus, we show you portraits of individuals who were applying for a visa to go to an EU Member State last year. Some of these photographs were taken at EU consulates or in their vicinity. Others were taken within the natural environment of the subject. Each individual had an opportunity to tell us something about himself or herself, about his or her hobby or interests, about their reasons for wanting to visit the EU. They were also asked to tell us about the difficulties they had encountered so far, i.e. at the initial stage of the visa-application process. We wanted to show, first of all, that the visa-application procedure has not only its formal aspect but also a human one too, as it affects specific individuals who have their own lives, interests, and aspirations.

We also wanted to show the consulates, both outside and inside, during and outside business hours. The dehumanised, austere interiors of these consulates contrast sharply with the smiling faces of the young people – smiling in spite of the many hours of waiting. The rooms of these consulates, swarming with people, are shown side by side with their empty spaces after hours.

This juxtaposition of "THEN" and "NOW" is not to serve simply as an analogy. The situation of the citizens of Belarus, Moldova or Ukraine who want to visit the EU differs in many respects from that of the citizens of Czechoslovakia, Hungary or Poland who wanted to travel to the West during the days of the Iron Curtain. There are many similarities between them, though. Undoubtedly, visiting a foreign country afforded one an opportunity to acquaint oneself with the workings of a different society and a different state and it still does so nowadays. It provoked reflection and offered an opportunity to acquire skills, competencies, or knowledge useful in one's professional career, as it does so nowadays.

In this context, the common experiences of the Visegrad countries are very significant indeed because they show the importance of both the freedom to travel and the lack thereof. Our interviewees stressed repeatedly that the value of freedom to travel is appreciated best by those who had just got it. It is apt to quote here Petruška Šustrová who told us, "My friends get out of their cars at every ex-border-crossing within the Schengen area and bow down. I do that too, because the disappearance of these borders is simply a miracle (...)."

Such a background gives rise to a sense of responsibility towards those who found themselves on the "wrong" side of the border so to speak. Magda Vášáryová put it bluntly when she stated, "I still consider our accession to the EU in 2004 a miracle though. (...) We had been dreaming of something like this for generations. Now, we have a responsibility towards those who remain outside the EU (...)."

Within this context, it seems that it is of paramount importance that we support East European countries in their efforts to provide their citizens with greater freedom to travel to the EU, i.e. to secure the adoption by the EU of a visa-free regime. This is even more pertinent since visa policy constitutes one of the most important EU instruments for deepening relations with its Eastern neighbours.

This publication has been prepared and is published under the project "Visa Policy towards Eastern Neighbours: Recommendations from the Visegrad Countries Perspective". The project contributors include the Association for International Affairs (the Czech Republic), the Hungarian Europe Society (Hungary), the Research Centre of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (Slovakia), and the Stefan Batory Foundation (Poland). The project was made possible thanks to financial support from the International Visegrad Fund.

We wish to thank wholeheartedly all those who agreed to share with us their experiences of travelling and thus contributed to the creation of this publication. We wish to thank also all those who provided us with the photographs shown below.

Olga Wasilewska
Stefan Batory Foundation

"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."

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, Tubingen University, Nottingham University, Stockholm-Sodertorns 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 Györffy

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?

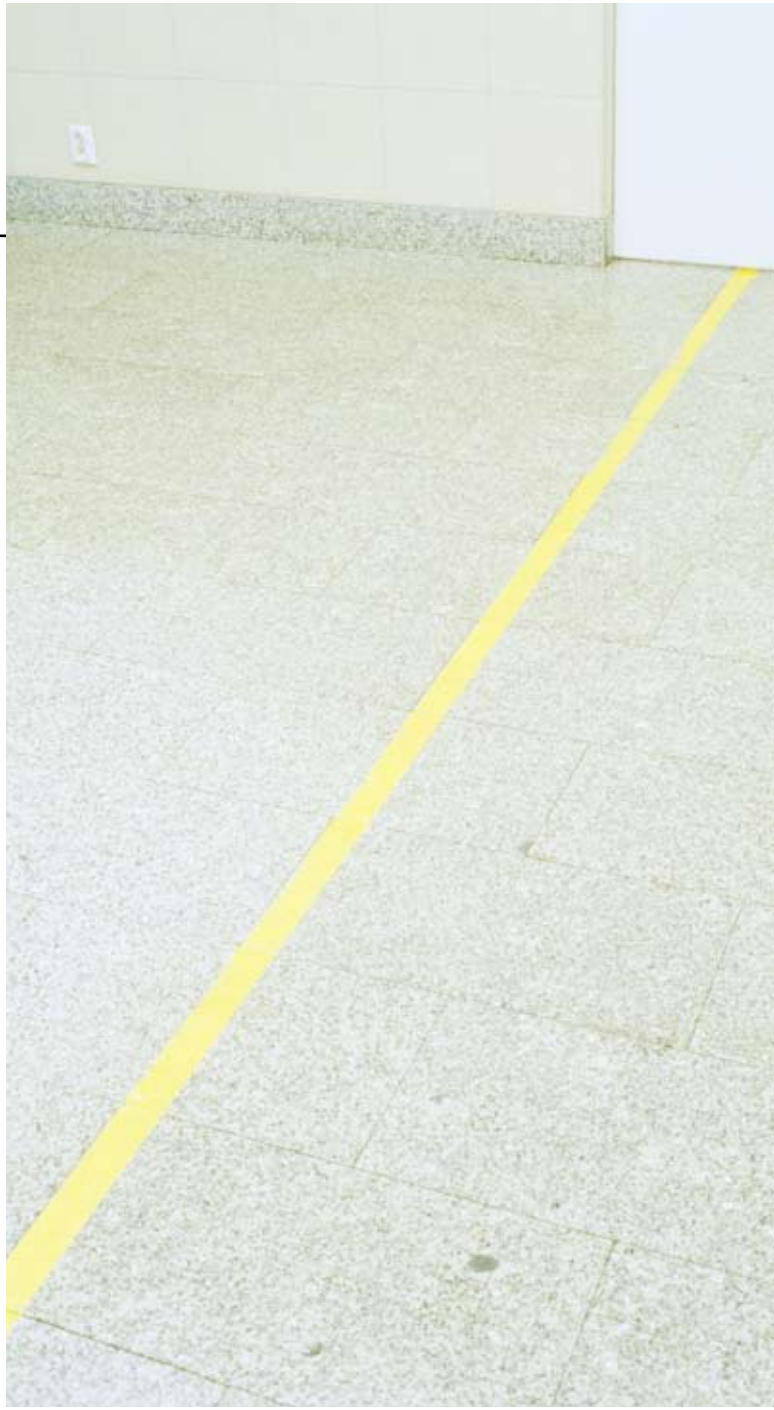
I think, if I hadn't had the opportunity to spend some time in Western Europe, my attitude and my personality would have been a bit different. The scholarships I was granted, like the Soros Scholarship that provided me with an opportunity to spend six months in Los Angeles (between 1988 and 1989), had 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?

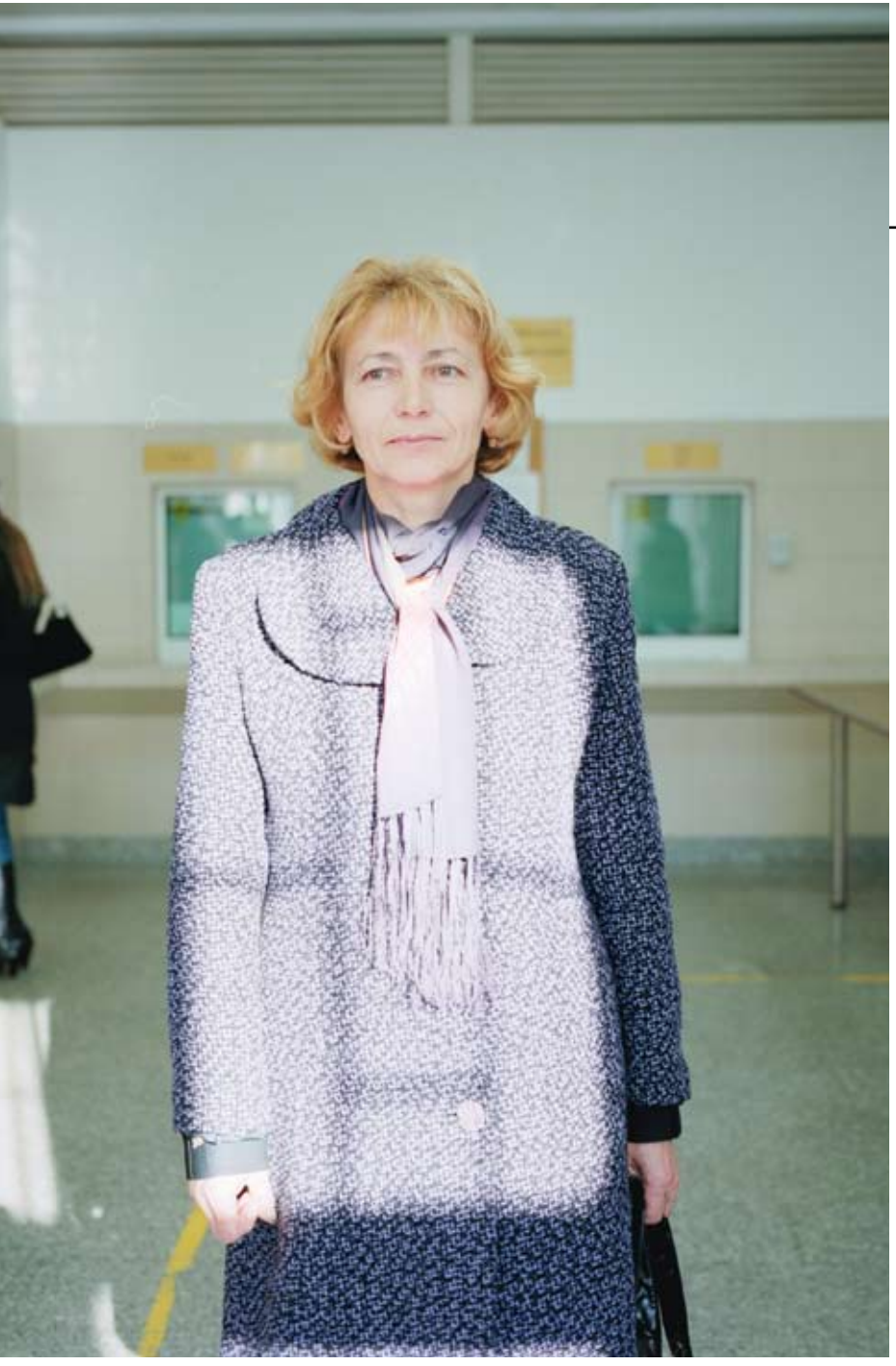
Yes, I was. But all my experiences as a professional also enriched my life in general. In the end, I can proudly say that I have not only have had opportunities to study or work in six different and interesting countries but also that my stays there were quite extensive. This allowed me not only to gather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



Queuing is a constant element of the visa-application process.
Kyiv, November 2008.



Inside the consulate of an EU Member State in Kyiv.
November 2008.

Neonila

from Ukraine

Neonila, 51. She lives in Pryluky, a town in Ukraine, where she teaches Polish. In her spare time she likes to read books and listen to music. This time she applied for a visa in order to take a supplementary language course in Lublin, Poland. She feels that the visa-application procedure should be changed. When she applied last time she had to present additionaly the original of a Letter of Invitation, which was not required of her before. She also had to submit a proof of employment.

"In fact, they were able to acquire only a limited knowledge of the realities of life in the West. Thus their quite unrealistic perceptions, acquired mostly from domestic sources and Austrian TV, made many of them feel rather dissatisfied when they started to experience the economic and social consequences of the post-1989 transformation."

Rudolf Chmel from Slovakia

About

was born in 1939 in Plzeň (then Czechoslovakia, and now the Czech Republic). He is a graduate of Comenius University in Bratislava. He is a literary critic and a member of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. He was the last Czechoslovak Ambassador to Hungary. He was also the Minister of Culture of the Slovak Republic and a member of its Parliament. He co-founded and has been an Editor-in-Chief of the socio-political monthly OS ("Občianska spoločnost"). He is actively involved in promoting the ideals and policies of the Visegrad Cooperation in Central Europe and, in particular, those relating to reconciliation between Slovaks and Hungarians.

photograph: Karin Bachmann

An interview
with Rudolf Chmel

What were travel opportunities like in Czechoslovakia prior to 1989?

We were living in a closed society for 40 years. Today's youth can't even imagine that travelling to the West was once an option available only to a few. Often, one had to have connections and access to foreign currencies. These conditions were, in general, not met without some form of corruption or cronyism, or other unusual practices. As a result, people in Czechoslovakia became accustomed to a life led in private, especially after the events of 1968. This involved a withdrawal from the public sphere, dominated as it was by ideology and political cynicism, and burying oneself, so to speak, among family members and close friends. Some members of the middle classes were allowed to travel though. These included doctors, especially surgeons, as they had a privileged position in a "socialist" society. They had patients everywhere, including amongst high-level Communist Party members. These doctors used to travel especially to third-world countries that maintained particularly friendly relations with the Soviet Block countries. Surprisingly enough, Libya belonged to this group in those days. As for my colleagues from more academic circles, I knew only a few who were able to go abroad more or less on a regular basis – not just occasionally – for a holiday.

The strict regime that we lived under created at least two entire generations that didn't have contact with the West and its realities. These generations were deprived of the opportunity to learn about the advantages and disadvantages of a liberal democracy, the rule of law, or the free market economy. In fact, they were able to acquire only a limited knowledge of the realities of life in the West. Thus their quite unrealistic perceptions, acquired mostly from domestic sources and Austrian TV, made many of them feel rather dissatisfied when they started to experience the economic and social consequences of the post-1989 transformation.

I remember that during the seventies and eighties, even a more liberal Budapest represented for many of us Czechoslovaks the "West". Not to mention Yugoslavia. Again, it was this limited and selective perception of the West – a supposed consumers' paradise – that was a major factor behind the difficulties experienced by many in adjusting to life after the transformation. Many of my friends seemed to have an uncritical admiration for the West. There is no doubt that life in the West was definitely more free and just. But you had to take responsibility for your life and be active, especially in the economic sphere. And many Czechoslovaks refused to acknowledge this fact through their rose-tinted spectacles.

What was the attitude of Westerners towards Eastern Europeans?

We were definitely considered to be second-class citizens. And those of us who were not prone to be passionately nationalistic even accepted this position of being the "losers" in the Cold War. Many ordinary Westerners and some Western politicians felt genuine pity for us but were unaware of being patronising towards us. Therefore, they could not have helped us much. This inferiority complex is still evident amongst some members of my generation. Fortunately though, it seems to have faded away or is non-existent among younger generations, also because we can travel more easily now. There is a hope that the mental transformation among the inhabitants of the Visegrad Group countries will be successful. I believe that although we Central Europeans have our own particularities, we have always been members of the Western world. Furthermore, we have not only benefited from this, but we have also enriched the West in many ways.

When did you go to the West for the first time? What kind of feelings accompanied that trip?

It was in the summer of 1969. I went on holiday to Austria and Italy. Though the presence of Soviet soldiers in Czechoslovakia was acutely felt in all spheres of life some aspects of the Prague Spring of 1968 still survived. We could take this holiday because we were able to obtain the so-called "hundred dollars exchange promise". The necessity to have such a document is incompre-

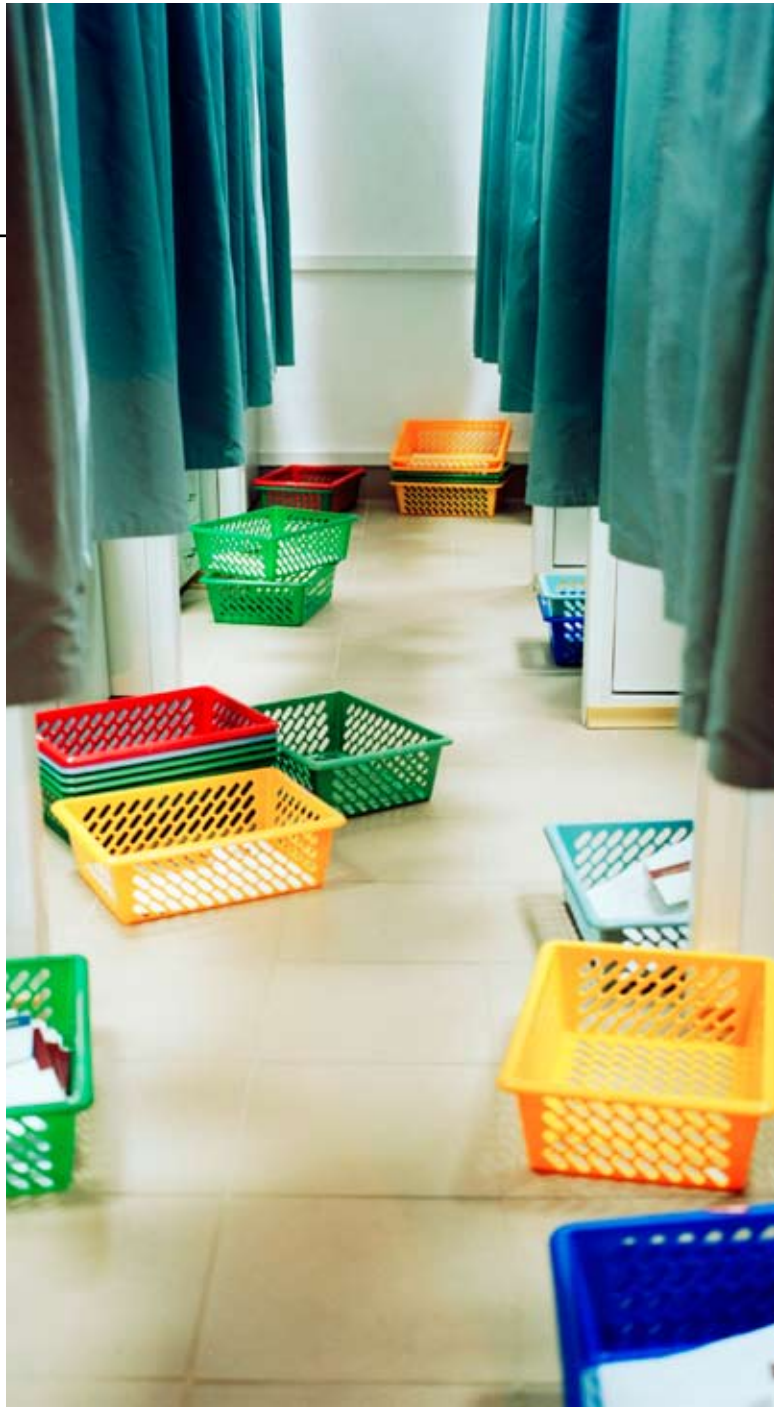
hensible to the young of today or unknown to them. With these hundred dollars I was supposed to be able to afford a ten-day holiday in the West including petrol, campground fee, and visits to the museums, galleries and historical sites.

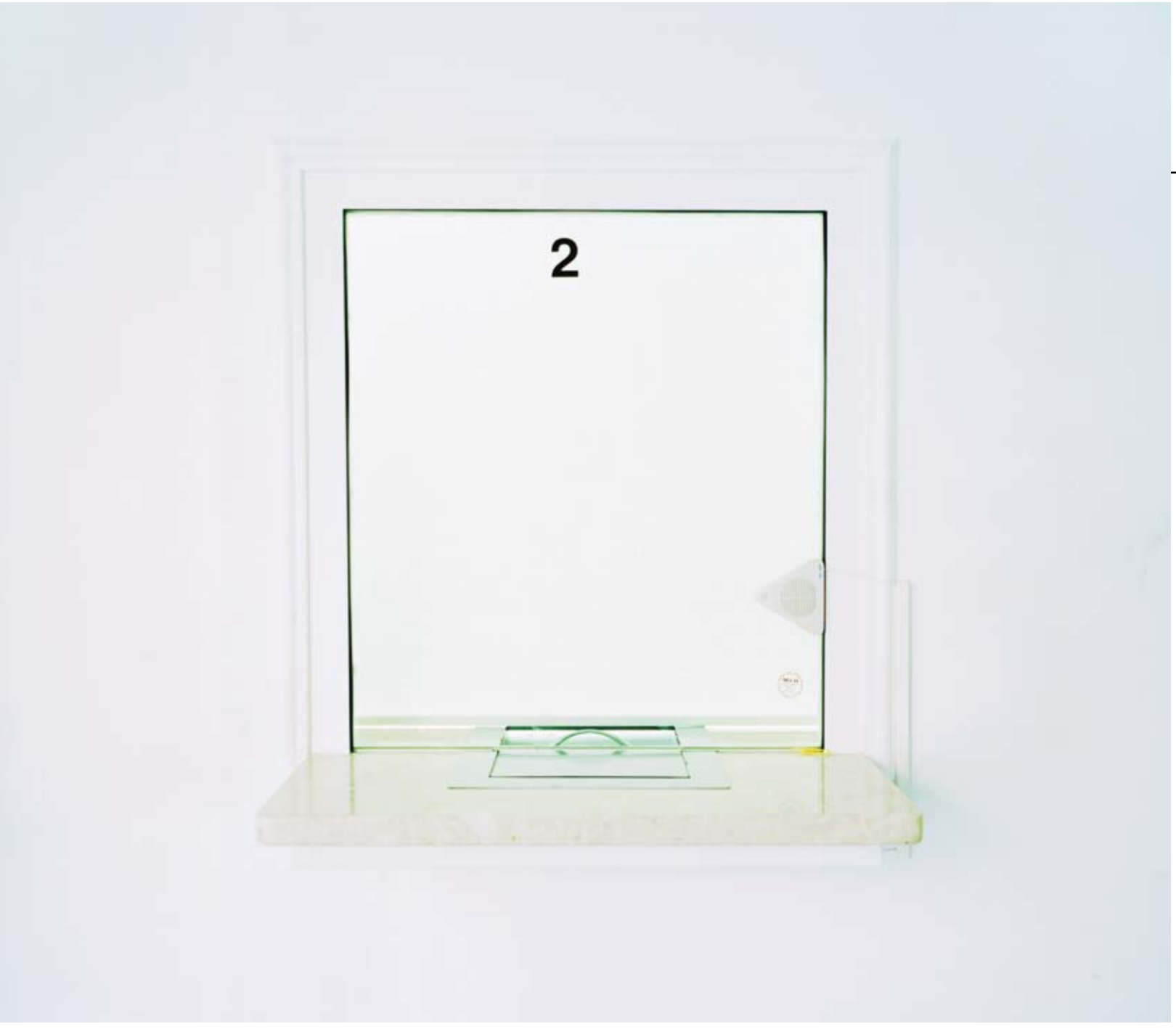
My second trip to the West did not take place until 1980. I was in my forties by then. I went with a group of fans to the European Football Championship in Italy. I was able to do that thanks to the connections my surgeon friends had in the Football Association. They belonged to the privileged few who used to travel on their own or via a travel agency every year. It was part of their lifestyle. Nowadays, nobody would consider this to be special.

I would like to stress that both these trips made me feel very nervous. I had to subject myself to many bureaucratic tortures in order to obtain the required permission. On the other hand, however, I did not experience any other forms of hardship in connection with these two trips. Similarly, when I went to a book fair in Frankfurt and a scientific conference in London during the late eighties, the border checks were quite stressful, especially as I was smuggling literature that was banned in our country.

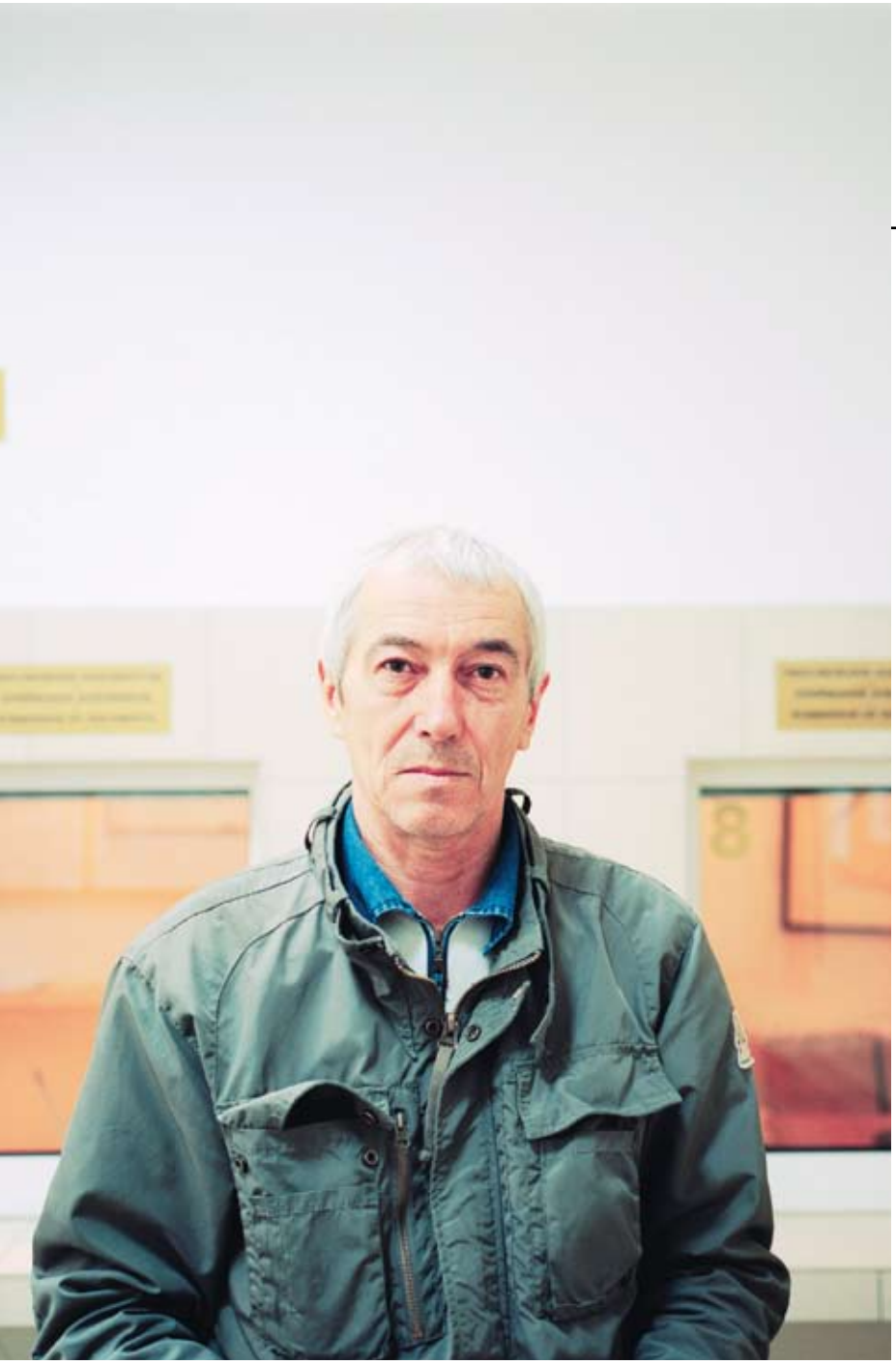
How did the situation change after 1989?

I started to travel a lot. For a holder of a diplomatic passport, like myself, crossing the borders became easy. I obviously felt a bit uneasy when I went to the US. Sometimes I also used to be looked at with suspicion by Austrian border guards. These experiences were more related though to the way the bureaucratic machinery of a rich country like Austria used to operate than to policies established during the Cold War. ••





The consulate of an EU Member State in Kyiv. After office hours.
November 2008.



Inside the consulate of an EU Member State in Kyiv.
November 2008.

Yevgen

from Ukraine

Yevgen, 54. He lives with his wife and five children in Kalita, a town in the Kyiv region, where he is involved in business. This photograph was taken when he was applying for a visa to go to Germany and Poland on business. He has already visited these countries before. This time he wasn't invited by the consulate to an additional interview but had to submit a whole bunch of documents. When asked to list the most burdensome elements of the visa-application procedure, or indicate the changes he would like to see, he refused to answer, probably afraid of the possible consequences.

"I was so overwhelmed when I went to the West for the first time that I couldn't even process all the information I was bombarded with during those three weeks."

Róza Hodosán from Hungary

About

was born in 1954 in Darvas, Hungary. She is a graduate of Loránd Eötvös University (Sociology). From 1982 to 1989 she was the Editor and an Associate of the underground AB Publishing House that specialised in publishing works of literature, sociology, political science, and philosophy that would not otherwise have been published because of communist censorship. She also worked as an editor of some underground magazines. Between 1989 and 1990 she was involved in organising the election campaign for the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ). She was a Member of the Hungarian Parliament from 1990 to 1998. Since 1999 she has been working for the Hungarian Institute for Social Policy and Labour.

photograph: private archives/ Róza Hodosán during her trip to London in 1988

An interview
with Róza Hodosán

I would like to ask you about your first trip to Western Europe. Can you tell me when, how, and where did you go?

I left Hungary for the first time in December 1987. This was my first trip abroad because I hadn't been able to afford to do it earlier. I had been deprived of having a passport until then. I got my first passport, allowing me to visit the West in 1987, when Hungary introduced a passport valid for the whole world. My then husband and I set off to Paris for three weeks. We went there through Austria and Germany by car.

What were your first impressions of the West?

My impressions etched themselves into my memory so well that I remember everything, even today. We went by car and the whole trip was amazing: the motorways with their modern conveniences and their lights that came on automatically. When I went to a public convenience for the first time I was looking for a switch to turn the light on for ages. It was a technical shock for me. And at the flat we were staying in, there was an answering machine. It used to turn on automatically, and I didn't know how to handle that. All I could do was shout: "Hello! Here I am!" We had a great time though. I had wanted to visit Paris ever since my childhood. This was the reason I was studying French. So by then I spoke this language quite well yet I could feel that the French didn't really like foreigners. This dislike was probably not directed only towards Eastern Europeans though. On the other hand, we were associated there with a group of intellectuals that followed Hungarian political events attentively, and thus their attitude towards us was rather friendly. All in all, France was quite receptive and tolerant.

It was not easy for me to express my feelings then. I was 33, living in a Communist country, shut off from the rest of the world. And suddenly I found myself in Western Europe. I used to read a lot about the West before, so everything was rather familiar to me. I could not say, for sure, how much this enriched my personality though. I was so overwhelmed when I went to the West for the first time that I couldn't even process all the information I was bombarded with during those three weeks. I had such a strong desire to experience all these things and when I finally had the opportunity to do so it was too much to take in all at once.

Did your experiences match your expectations?

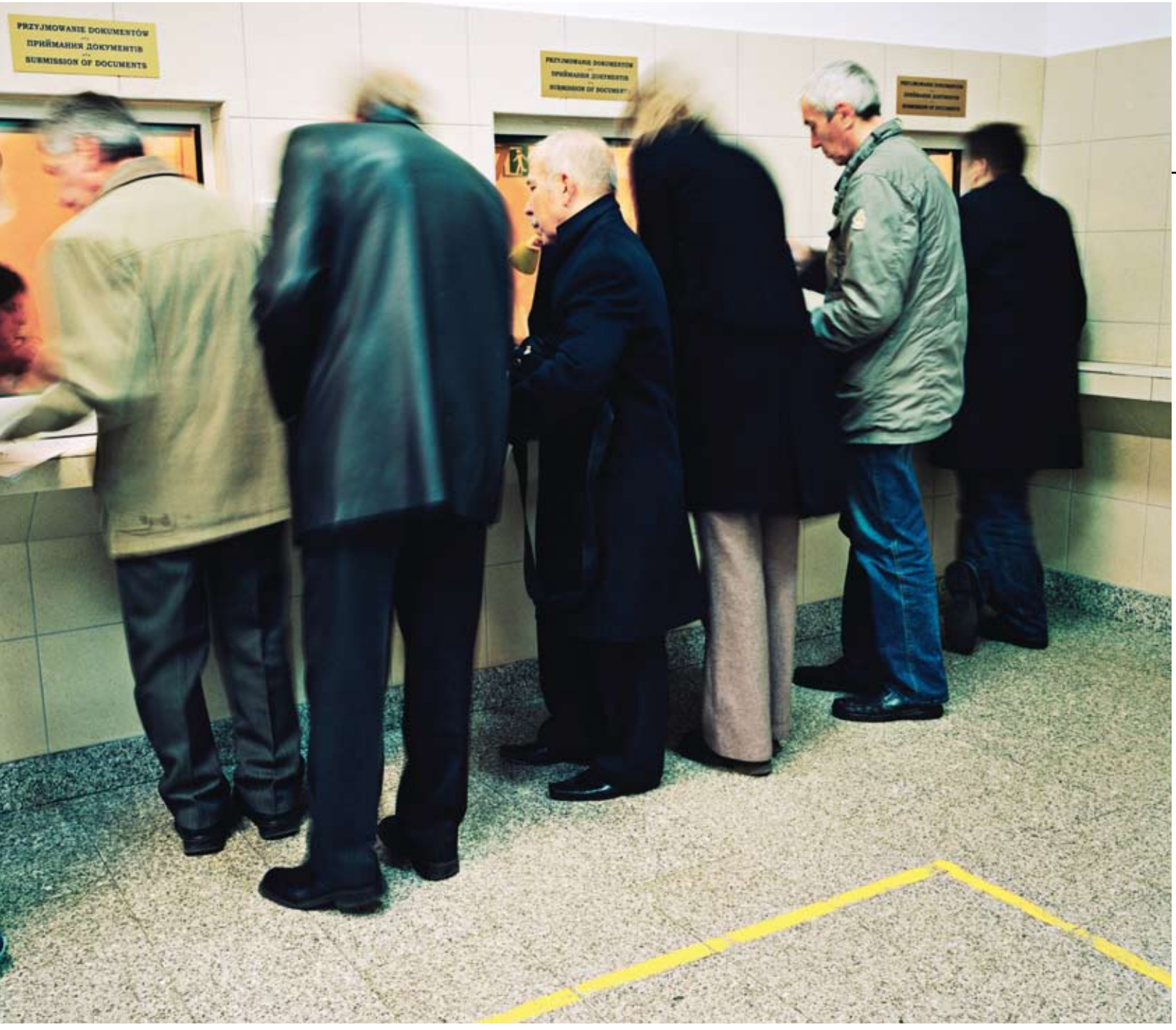
Yes, they did, absolutely. They even surpassed them. It's not easy to talk about that. I was most impressed with the cultural values and astonished by the level of technical development which was hard to comprehend for me. I was surprised, for example, that the French used computers to search through their phonebooks. I saw a lot of things I had never seen before. As for cultural values – as I said – they made a lasting impression on me. However, I had some minor disappointments, such as my inability to see the Mona Lisa so well due to the extensive crowds. But being able to walk along the streets of Paris and explore everything I wanted to see more than compensated for this inconvenience. In reality, everything was more beautiful than in my earlier imagination. Everyone had his or her own individual point of view. Thanks to my profession, as a sociologist, I was able to understand that everything I saw was not as fantastic as it appeared, that there were problems in the West too. But since these were not my personal problems they didn't concern me.

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

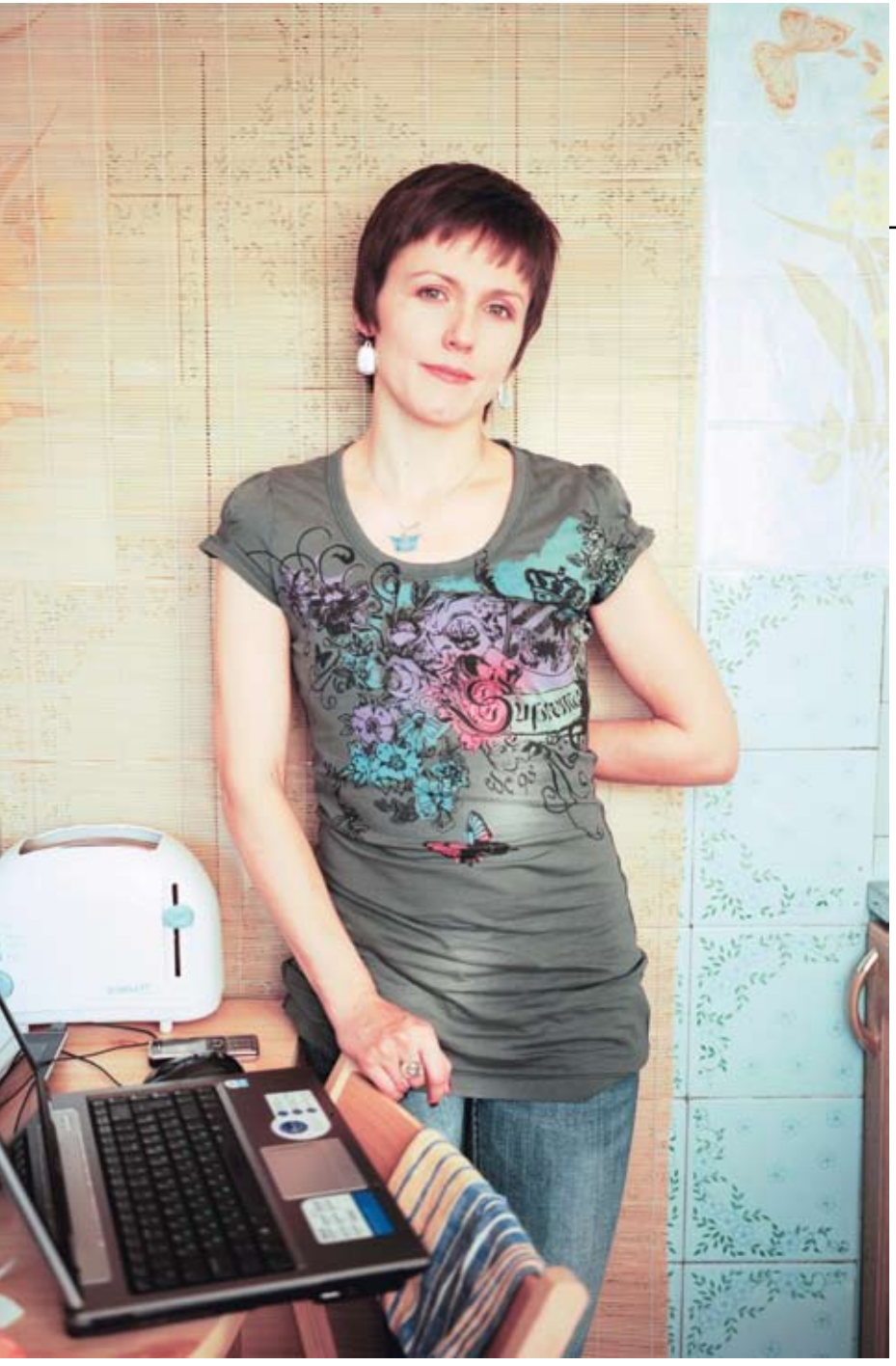
In Eastern Europe we had to fight to have the very rights Westerners took almost for granted. You could see the newspaper headlines day after day. The various newspapers commented on the same event in various ways. Parliament was operating freely and France was open and tolerant towards political refugees. As for the free market economy and capitalism, one could experience them as soon as one arrived. There was fresh food in the markets – even at weekends – and I didn't have to stand in a long queue to buy a loaf of bread.

What impact did your travels have on your career?

My situation was a bit different. As a member of the democratic opposition I used to travel to the West to inform émigrés about Hungary and its political situation. That was the reason for travelling there. The émigrés appreciated the fact that we were publishing underground periodicals and magazines in Hungary. I made a few friends in the US. My English was not that good then because the only language course I was able to afford and to attend was not really that helpful, so later I started to learn English by myself. In the end, my English was okay, but not good enough to help me to advance my professional career. My travels did not change my personality all that much. I used to read a lot and had some journalist friends in the West that used to impress me in some ways. My trip to the US had more significance though. I realised that I was responsible for my life, and that I could control my destiny. I knew that before – intellectually – but it was in the US that this became an important element in my outlook on life. I tend to forget about that from time to time but nevertheless this realisation has underpinned my life since then. ••



Inside the consulate of an EU Member State in Kyiv.
November 2008.



In Kateryna's apartment in Kyiv.
November 2008.

Kateryna

from Ukraine

Kateryna, 32. She is a journalist and a manager of cultural projects. She is involved in arts both professionally and in her spare time. She lives with her son in Kyiv. The last time she applied for a visa to the EU was when she was to attend a conference in Brussels. She complained to us about the excessive number of documents she had to collect and submit, the amount of time she had to spend on preparing the documents, and the unfriendly attitude of consular officials towards her and other Ukrainians. In her opinion, the complexity of the visa-application procedure should reflect the character of the journey: an attendance at a two-day conference should not require a whole day of waiting in a queue at the consulate with a box full of documents. And of course, she would welcome a change in the attitude towards applicants.

"I always say that Brezhnev was right when he said that ordinary citizens should not be allowed to travel abroad because if they do come back, they won't feel good anymore in their own country."

Kálmán Katona from Hungary

About

was born in 1948 in Pécs, Hungary. He is a graduate of the Technical University of Budapest. Between 1966 and 1967 he worked for the Technical Directorate of the Post, Radio and TV as a technician. Next, he worked for Tungsram (as an engineer) and Mertcontrol (as a consultant). He was a Member of the Hungarian Parliament (from 1990 to 1994), and became an MP again (in 2006). He was the Minister of Transport, Communication and Water Management from 1998 to 2000. From 2000 to 2002 he was the Chairman and the Chief Executive Officer of the Hungarian Power Companies LTD. He is also a Councillor of the City of Budapest.

photograph: private archives/ Kálmán Katona with his family during a trip to Switzerland

An interview
with Kálmán Katona

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

My passport was revoked for political reasons in 1971. After writing many applications and exchanging many letters I got, for the first time, a passport allowing me to travel to the other Soviet Block countries. Next, I was granted a passport valid for the whole world. My sister was living in London at that time but I applied to travel only as a tourist. I remember that I had to pay 70 US dollars for the passport. Once I had it, I went to Switzerland. One of my wife's colleagues from an orchestra she used to play in – Vili was his name – emigrated to Switzerland and invited us to spend some time with him in Zurich. Before my first trip to the West, I visited Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Romania, travelling there on my "socialist" passport.

What were you experiences of crossing the border to the West the first time?

As far as I can remember now, we were crossing successive borders in the West without being stopped for checks at all. The guards simply signalled us to pass through. We – my wife, children and I – went to Switzerland in my old, beat up car. Since we had valid passports and visas everything ran smoothly. We had to pay for using the motorway in every country though. We were only nervous when exiting the motorway, at Hegyeshalom, at the Hungarian-Austrian border crossing, because we were smuggling US dollars we had got from our relatives. We hid these dollars in my shaving foam. We did not get subjected to any thorough checks throughout this journey except once, on entry into England, where we were ordered to open the boot of our car. I remember that on entry into Belgium we were not checked at all but there was another car, driven by a man with a huge moustache who was travelling with a child, probably his grandchild. The guards subjected him to a thorough check. When they opened the boot of his car they discovered that he had been trying to smuggle many bottles of whisky. We did not know whether they were checking him because other travellers had ratted on him or else, because the guards had a very keen and experienced eye. We didn't have any problems crossing the borders although our car was an old, beat up Trabant.

You mentioned a trip to England. Did you have to apply for a visa to go there?

Yes, of course we had to do so. My sister was living there but we were only intending to visit her and therefore we applied only for a tourist visa. Before leaving for England, I had to make many arrangements. The administrative procedures were very lengthy. I had to stand in long queues. It was natural to only be given a date for an appointment after a month or more. But we were so happy that we were going to travel that we didn't complain at all.

What were your first impressions of the West?

I always say that Brezhnev was right when he said that ordinary citizens should not be allowed to travel abroad because if they do come back, they won't feel good anymore in their own country. To top it all, the first time we went abroad it was to Switzerland. Of course, getting there by car, we had to travel through Austria, but we didn't stop anywhere. We simply slept in our car. As soon as we went through the border at Hegyeshalom, we saw that all the houses in Austria were freshly painted. The roads were well maintained... Everything looked well kept. Then, when we were in Switzerland, I was cycling a lot. I remember that the roads were so clean and the edge of the asphalt was so clearly delimited by a line of paint and the neatly mown grass. When we went to Ticino, a place near the Italian border, I finally discovered some litter on the streets of Switzerland. At last something familiar, just like at home, I thought. Switzerland was too clean, too orderly for me – everywhere, even in the smallest towns. Austria was like that too, whereas in Hungary the old paint was peeling off the building walls, the streets were littered and full of potholes. The Western world was like a fairyland to us back then.

Did your experiences match your expectations?

I'm from Keszthely. We used to watch Austrian TV programmes from Graz, because the reception from Hungarian TV was poor or nonexistent in our region. So we did have expectations, of course... Everything in the West was perfect in our minds – better and more colourful than in reality. Yet we were still quite amazed when, for example, we went to a McDonalds for the first time. One of my colleagues – a Hungarian dissident – took us there, in Frankfurt. He wanted to impress us with how well he was doing so he invited us to this restaurant, as though it would be such a special place. We played our part in his fantasy, so to speak. The streets were so clean in the West. I suppose though that we were exploring only neighbourhoods frequented by tourists. Later on in my life, I acquired the habit of looking into strange nooks and crannies such as the last station on an underground line, etc. I know a good story about that. Once József Antall had a conversation with Chancellor Helmud Kohl. Kohl said to Antall that he went to Budapest and discovered that everything had changed a lot since the communist days: the attire, the attitude of the people and the like. Antall asked Kohl where precisely he had been. "We visited Váci Street, Danube Promenade, and Buda Castle" – said Kohl. To that Antall replied: "So you only saw your own countrymen".

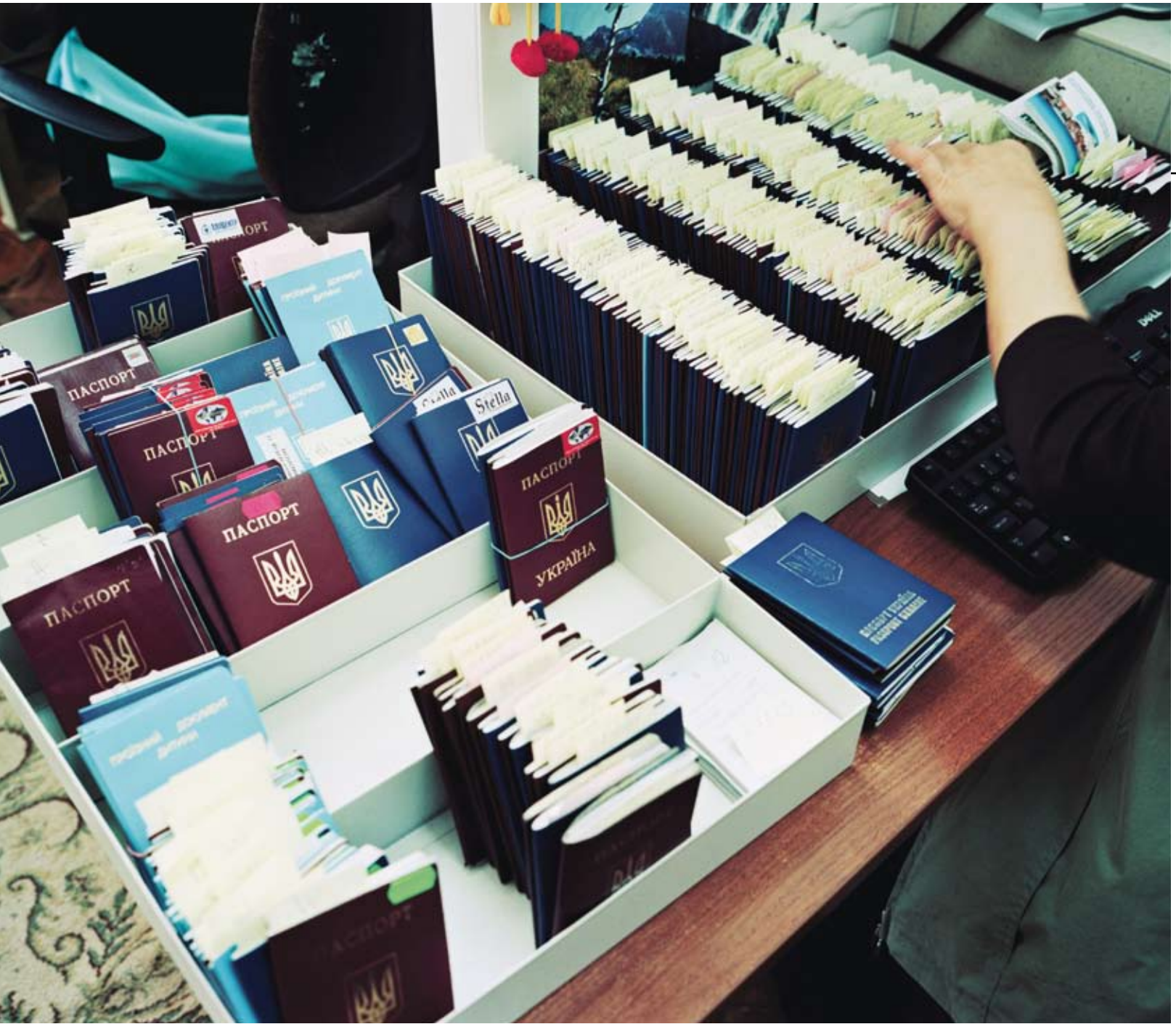
I had a similar experience when I was abroad. I explored the cathedral in Milan and found myself surrounded by tourists – just like me: a map in hand, camera hanging around the neck. It's true. I had anticipated so much before I went to the West for the first time, most of all because I had to wait to be granted a passport for such a long time. My sister used to send us from England books, photos of the Beatles, nice jackets, packed in Harrods bags with the logo on them...

What impact did your trips to the West have on your life, if any?

I started to travel as a tourist well before 1990. During my first visit to Switzerland I learned, for example, that a child of a wealthy Swiss family was allowed to eat ice cream only once a day, even though there was a big jar of it in his or her family's fridge. On the other hand, my kids wanted to eat ice cream there – while we were staying at Vili's house – all day long. I guess that this was because they knew that they would not be able to get such good ice cream back home.

Our host, Frau Baumann, kept asking whether we had visited the Zoo or a museum. We were ashamed to admit to her that we could not afford to go. We were quite happy just to be able to walk around Lake Zurich and do some window-shopping. Two days later we discovered an envelope on the nightstand. When we opened it we found a lot of money and a note with the instruction: "For little pleasures only". These days, I continue this tradition by giving money to my children to spend on little pleasures like a dinner in a restaurant. It's good to do things like this.

This is how Frau Baumann from Switzerland enriched my life. On the other hand, I think that I am a lucky man. I have a wife who is charming, who speaks many foreign languages. Thus, wherever we went we had a good time together. Later on, I started to travel in an official capacity – as an MP or as a Minister. People I met then were more formal and thus superficial in their attitude towards me. One was respected, got the best seats in theatres. And people wrote poems for my name day, just because I was an important politician. As soon as the negotiations about some privatisation deal ended though the same gentleman would not even be bothered to greet me as was he passing me on a street. First, they all line up before you pretending to be polite, and then they don't even return your calls. ••



Inside the consulate of an EU Member State in Kyiv.
November 2008.

Inside the consulate of an EU Member State in Kyiv.
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Dmytro

from Ukraine

Dmytro, 19. He studies law. His hobby is photography. This photograph was taken when he was waiting for his first visa to the EU, to visit Warsaw. He feels that the worst thing about the visa-application procedure is the time involved. He thinks that the procedure should be made much shorter.

"Of course, we knew that it were not material goods, the well-stocked shops that were the most important element in a democratic State. That was the appeal of the West. However, whenever I arrived back at an airport in Poland, so grey and unexciting – when the colours of the West were becoming only a memory – I felt joy that I was back in my country again."

Maja Komorowska from Poland

About

was born in 1937 in Warsaw, Poland. She is one of the best-known theatre and film actresses in Poland. She is a graduate of the State Higher School of Theatre in Krakow, Puppetry Department. During the seventies she was a member of the Jerzy Grotowski group. Later on she cooperated closely with Krystian Lupa. As a film actress she worked for Krzysztof Zanussi ("Family Life", "Behind the Wall", and "The Year of the Quiet Sun"), and was his muse. She also played leading roles for other well-known Polish film directors, including Andrzej Wajda, Krzysztof Kieślowski, and Tadeusz Konwicki. Currently, she works as an actress for the Współczesny Theatre in Warsaw and teaches at the Theatre Academy in Warsaw.

photograph: private archives/ Travelling around Germany during the sixties

An interview
with Maja Komorowska

As an actress you are capable of portraying different characters, from dramatic to comedy. Did you undergo a transformation of sorts while travelling abroad too? What impact did travelling have on your life back in the days of communist Poland?

Undoubtedly, travelling was very important back then. Travelling afforded one the ability to see a world that was different from the one we were living in. Generally, I did not travel for private reasons in those days, though. I travelled mostly to perform with a theatre or play in a film, or else, to appear at a film screening. Privately, I only went abroad once to visit my sister in West Germany, in a place near Hanover. Apart from having to wait for a passport, I never had any problems.

What are your memories of your first trip to the West?

I went to the West for the first time in the sixties. It was with Grotowski's "Teatr Laboratorium". I was playing in "The Constant Prince". We were performing in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. Then we went to Paris and Spoleto in Italy. These trips were an adventure for me, an opportunity to discover a new, unknown world. We knew that we were living in a communist state, and that travelling abroad was a privilege.

Did you have any problems with obtaining a passport or a visa?

The only inconvenience was the wait for a passport. I didn't have to apply for it though. PAGART Agency or Film Polski used to make all the arrangements for me.

The West was another world for us back then. Today it is hard to imagine the differences that existed between Poland and the West. Poland with its greyness contrasted sharply with the West and its colourfulness. I have to stress too, that I always appreciated the fact that I could travel and see the West with my very own eyes during those difficult times.

So it was easier for an artist to go abroad than for the so-called ordinary folk?

Grotowski's Theatre was a special place. I was becoming better known, also abroad. When we were on the road with a play we didn't have time to explore the city we were performing in. We used to rehearse in the morning and perform in the evening.

Of course, the West enraptured us with its wealth and prosperity. One wanted to bring something back for one's family or friends. But our means were scarce. We were given a daily allowance in a foreign currency but it was rather meagre. Probably, today's youth would find it difficult to imagine but we were not allowed to take foreign currencies out of Poland. And abroad one could not, of course, use ATMs or pay with a credit card in a shop. Thus we tried to be thrifty with our allowances, save some, and use the money to buy gifts for our family and friends. I remember that I bought a non-iron shirt for my son that seemed so beautiful to me back then. All these sweaters and tops filling the shelves of shops danced in front of our eyes with their colours. I remember that my mother wanted so much to have a box of good matches. So I bought them for her.

Was your application for a passport ever refused?

I had difficulties relating to travelling only twice. I was working for Krzysztof Zanussi. Zanussi was not that well known as a film director as yet so we were not allowed to go abroad when we wanted. Zanussi reminded me of that recently. My memories of that time are somewhat vague because matters such as those relating to travelling arrangements were not something I used to deal with. I remember though that when I was awarded a Grand Prix at the San Remo Festival I was not able to go there to pick up the award. Something like this seems impossible to me today: an award-winning actress unable to show up at a film festival to pick up her statue. So I did not participate in the Grand Prix event. Instead, I was invited to a meeting in Warsaw where an official – I don't remember whether from Film Polski or from the Polish Ministry of Culture – handed me a Gold Medal on a ribbon with the colours of the Italian flag and words "San Remo". And that

was the "award" I picked up.

Did your first encounter with the West cause you a shock because of the consumer opportunities, shops well stocked with goods of all sorts, or did you also suffer a culture shock?

As I said, I didn't have time to come into contact with real life abroad. My time was spent in rehearsals and giving performances – on the intensive work. During the stay in Japan and India – where we were staying as guests of festival organisers – we were put up in a luxury hotel at their expense. This luxury was a shock to me. I felt uncomfortable.

Travelling allowed one to come into contact with another political system – democracy. Of course, we knew that it were not material goods, the well-stocked shops that were the most important element in a democratic state. That was the appeal of the West. However, whenever I arrived back at an airport in Poland, so grey and unexciting – when the colours of the West were becoming only a memory – I felt joy that I was back in my country again. I was surprised that I was so willing to return. And I felt like that every time I came back. Throughout all the years of communist Poland I knew that I wouldn't know how to live as an émigré. I wouldn't emigrate even to be free. My father remained in Poland even though our family lost all its wealth. Though Poland became stricken with poverty and the Stalinist regime took over, my father still used to say that our place is here and nowhere else. My parents instilled in us a love for our country. I wanted to work in Poland. I wanted to achieve something here. I wanted to have control over my life here, in my homeland. I was always in a hurry to get back home. Colourful shops, the wealth, even the freedom, were not enough to keep me in the West. I had a feeling that I had to "guard" my country. There were some "small" matters in Poland but yet we thought that we were the ones who had to attend to them. I was not the only one who used to think like that.

Did anything unpleasant ever happen to you during passport control or customs clearance?

I was once subjected to a body search. It was during Martial Law. But it was done rather for show. I was taken into a separate room where I was subjected to a rather cursory search. It was obvious that border guards and customs officers were not deriving any satisfaction from their work. Of course, they used to go through our things to check whether we were not by any chance carrying something forbidden. But passengers in free countries were, and are also subjected to checks at borders, and that's understandable. During a check at a US airport you even have to take your footwear off and pass through a metal detecting gate to board a plane. But that is understandable after the 11 September events.

Were you ever made to feel a second-class person abroad?

No, I was not. I never felt that. On the contrary, we felt we belonged to the first-class category because people in the West were interested in us. They tried to approach us and see us. In addition, I really didn't want to feel like a "second-class" person so I simply didn't allow myself to feel that way. Of course, a person from the Communist Block visiting the West was aware that they had everything. And I am not thinking here only of consumerism. And despite having all that wealth and prosperity around me I only brought back a box of matches. Of course, I used to wonder back then why the world was organised that way. Why was there such inequality in the world? I didn't imagine back then that Poland would undergo a transformation towards democracy so soon. Of course, our path towards democracy was, and still is, very difficult, and democracy – as John Paul II used to say – is not only given to us but also demanded of us. But back in those days we did not expect that communism would collapse. It's a well-known fact that there were people in Poland who were working towards some form of democratisation and believed that it would eventually happen but nobody knew exactly when.

Which of your journeys was the longest?

It was the one to India and Japan. I went there with Krzysztof Zanussi. As far as the culture and geography is concerned these are the countries that are located furthest from Poland. On the other hand, the trip to France showed me what democracy and civil society were really all about. It also made me aware of the enormous gap between Poland and their democracy that existed back then. From the perspective of time gone by, when I think of communist Poland and my foreign journeys back then, I remember how much I used to long for my homeland. I always wanted to live here. ••

Inside the consulate of an EU Member State in Kyiv.
November 2008.

Inside the Common Visa Application Centre in Chisinau.
November 2008.

Natalya

from Moldova

Natalya, 31. She is a lawyer. She likes to travel whenever she can. She is shown here with her son waiting in a Common Visa Application Centre in Chisinau. She applied for a visa to go to an Austrian ski resort to ski. She has already visited several EU Member States. She complained about the need to collect and submit so many documents.

"My passport was revoked at the end of the sixties and thus I could not travel again until after the 1989 Revolution. So one could say that I didn't have any problems crossing borders at all, back then."

Miroslav Kusý from Slovakia

About

was born in 1931 in Bratislava (then Czechoslovakia, and now Slovakia). After the Prague Spring was put down in 1968 he was expelled from public and academic life. He was one of the three original signatories to Charter 77 in 1977 which demanded that respect for human rights be restored in Czechoslovakia. After the 1989 Revolution he became actively involved in politics. He was a member of the Government of National Reconciliation of Czechoslovakia. He was the Director of the Chancellery of the President of Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel, in Bratislava until 1992. He was a Chancellor of Comenius University in Bratislava from 1990 to 1991. He was also a founder of the Slovak Helsinki Committee for Human Rights and of the Milan Šimečka Foundation. He was a Professor of Political Science at the Comenius University where he held the UNESCO Chair on Human Rights.

photograph: private archives

An interview
with Miroslav Kusý

What are your memories of travelling abroad during the period of "real socialism"?

My passport was revoked at the end of the sixties and thus I could not travel again until after the 1989 Revolution. So one could say that I didn't have any problems crossing borders at all, back then. I managed only once to go abroad – to Poland – as a signatory of Charter 77. One could cross the border with Poland – for tourist reasons only – at Krkonoše, so I did. While in Poland we met with representatives of Solidarity. After the Prague Spring was put down in 1968 the new regime declared me persona non grata. I was expelled from the University so I tried to get by as best as I could. I worked as a librarian at first. Then I lost that job when I signed Charter 77. I had to work as a casual labourer after that. Officially, my passport was revoked for my attempts to travel to the Caucasus.

My first official trip abroad was to Poland too. I went there as a member of the Government of National Reconciliation. Tadeusz Mazowiecki was the Prime Minister of Poland then. As fate would have it, I was the first Minister of Government to visit Poland so Mazowiecki hailed my arrival. Thus, my first trip abroad was quite an event in itself – it was very exciting.

What was crossing the borders like in those days? What was the attitude of border guards and customs officers towards travellers then?

Following the 1989 Revolution there was great enthusiasm, all around. For example, the "Hello Europe!" project was carried out on 10 December 1989 under which 150,000 Slovaks availed themselves of the opportunity to cross the Danube to Austria for the very first time. We expected only a few thousand people to show up. There were so many of us that finally the Austrian border guards gave up and stopped checking our passports.

When did you go to a Western European country the first time?

My first trip to the West was to Austria, to Vienna. It was in the sixties. I went there partly because of Vienna's geographical proximity to Bratislava. I had some contacts with the university there. I went to Vienna again soon after the 1989 Revolution as the Chancellor of Comenius University. Soon, we had three daily buses taking students to Vienna in the morning, and back to Bratislava in the evening. Our students were able to take courses there and many took advantage of this opportunity.

Did you feel discriminated against during your travels across Europe in the sixties because you were from Eastern Europe?

I used to feel uneasy at the borders even after the 1989 Revolution. For example, at airports, there used to be one line for EU citizens and another for the rest of us. Border checks were, of course, even stricter during the Cold War. Yet, we were treated abroad with some empathy back then. It was easier for us to travel during the sixties – for a while, anyway. I was a philosophy teacher back then and my colleagues from the University of Vienna used to invite me there, often, for discussions and conferences. It was easier to travel back then for a while but we still needed permission from the Czechoslovak authorities. I also remember that following the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact armies on 21 August 1968 borders with the West were completely open for us for a short while. Austrians let everyone who wanted to flee from Czechoslovakia into Austria without any documents that would otherwise be required.

Prior to 1969, it was easier to get a visa than to get the necessary documents from the various domestic institutions. One had to approach a bank, one's employer, etc. One had to have a certificate to show that one was politically correct. One had to have confirmation from one's Housing Association that one was co-existing peacefully with one's neighbours: that one was not, for example, in the habit of listening to Radio Free Europe. Securing all such documents did not guarantee success though. It could still happen that a colleague of yours became jealous and ratted on you: that, for example, you were planning to meet with Czechoslovak émigrés abroad. You could even be told to return home at the border.

What were your first impressions of the West? What are your memories of your first visit there?

I used to travel to the West every now and then even before the Prague Spring was put down. My last stay in the West back then was a half-year scholarship in Brussels. I was there in 1969 under the cultural exchange programme. So I had an opportunity to acquaint myself with the West. My first contact with it provoked a culture shock of sorts. I was amazed at the consumption opportunities there and of the affluence of West European countries, especially when compared to the general scarcity that I knew from home. Another shock involved the freedom enjoyed by Westerners. In particular, their freedom of expression and the openness of their public discussions contrasted sharply with the rigidity of our system and the closed society we had been living in for already forty years.

What did you think about Western democracy then? How significant were the differences between their economic, legal, and social environment and ours?

These differences were very significant indeed, especially as concerns the economy and law. But then also, in contrast to our closed society, where the majority tended to lead their real lives at home, in private, and avoid any contact with the state, Westerners seemed to feel that there were values worth upholding and fighting for. I welcomed that. This contrast deepened even further during the so-called "normalisation", a period in the Czechoslovak history between 1968 and 1989 when the majority chose to bury themselves even more in the private sphere and looked on activities of dissident circles, if not with complete cynicism and disdain, then certainly with some... They considered dissidents to be utopians. It was obvious that the free market economy provided Westerners with more opportunities and choices than the planned economy of the socialist state.

Did you ever consider emigrating to the West after 1989 transformation?

Emigration was not an option worthy of consideration after that. I was to move to Austria much, much earlier though. It was in the spring of 1977 when the Czechoslovak authorities started to persecute the signatories of Charter 77. I even made some arrangements with an Austrian Consulate back then. Austria was guaranteeing us political asylum. But then the Czechoslovak State Security officers offered me the possibility to emigrate too, and immediately as well, whereas ordinarily, one was not able to emigrate legally. Or else it took years to arrange it with the Czechoslovak authorities. These officers told me that if I didn't like Czechoslovakia, I could leave at once, to which I replied that I liked it here and would stay. I was stubborn that way.

I am a philosopher and a philosophy teacher, by profession, but the events of the Prague Spring prompted me to become involved in politics. After the Warsaw Pact armies invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968 I spent half a year in Brussels on a scholarship and was offered a post there. I rejected it. When Czechoslovakia split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1992 I was wondering whether to stay in the former or not. I had a good academic and political position there, as well as many personal ties. Finally I decided to live in Slovakia. ••

Applying for a visa entails the need to present a vast number of documents.

Vadim and Luminita in a student hostel in Chisinau.
November 2008.

Vadim and Luminita from Moldova

Vadim, 21. He studies and works in Chisinau. This photograph was taken in a student hostel there. It shows him with his girlfriend Luminita. It was taken when he was to go as a tourist to Romania again. He has already visited Hungary too. Obtaining a visa was difficult this time. He had to submit a vast number of documents. Plus, the whole process cost him, all in all, around Euro 70. He feels too that the whole procedure should take much less time.

"I overheard one consular officer saying to another: 'It's that double-edged sword again.' He meant that as a holder of a Letter of Invitation from a university I could come up with an idea to stay in Germany as a refugee or in some other way. This fear the West European officials had of us travellers from the Eastern Europe was quite common."

Ferenc Kőszeg from Hungary

About

was born in 1939 in Budapest, Hungary. He is a graduate of Loránd Eötvös University and worked for Szépirodalmi and Európa publishing houses. In 1979 he signed Charter 77 for which he was sacked from his job. In 1981 he started to publish in "Beszélő" (an underground journal of the Democratic Opposition). In 1988 he became a founding member of the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ). In 1989 he co-founded the Hungarian Chapter of the Helsinki Committee. From 1990 to 1994 he was the Editor-in-Chief of "Beszélő". He was a Member of the Hungarian Parliament from 1990 to 1998.

photograph: private archives/ During trip to Berlin

An interview
with Ferenc Kőszeg

When did you go to Western Europe for the first time?

I went there in the first half of the sixties, when an ordinary Hungarian citizen could finally get a passport. Passports were valid then only for Europe and only for a year. Later on, their validity was extended to two, and then, five years. These extensions were accompanied though by the introduction of a limit on the length of a single stay abroad – only 30 days. Furthermore, one could apply for permission to leave the country again only after two years had passed, and only if you could produce a Letter of Invitation. Otherwise one could only apply for it every three years.

I got my first passport in 1962, with some help from a well-placed individual. My mother was a dentist and one of her patients was the child of a Party leader. This man helped me to get my passport. I was to go to England. I had applied for a visa to the UK earlier – in 1957. But the application was rejected because the British authorities were afraid that I was going to emigrate since my distant relatives from the UK had tried to arrange permission for me to settle permanently there. Finally, this time I got my visa for the UK but it was after a rather lengthy procedure. While waiting for this visa I was afraid that my passport would expire. Therefore I went to Austria where I spent almost a year studying and waiting. I couldn't go home to Hungary even if I had wanted to because I would not be able to leave the country again as I had permission only for a single stay abroad. I had to visit the Austrian immigration office every other month to extend my permission to stay. I always managed to get it. Finally, I got my visa for England – in February of 1963. But first I had to sign a written declaration that I did not want to settle permanently in the UK. So I spent two months in England and a few weeks in Germany, and then I went back home to Hungary in the autumn of 1963.

Before leaving home from Vienna in 1963, I went to Heidelberg on a scholarship for a summer university course. Once there, I went to the West German Consulate to get a visa for West Germany. While waiting in a long queue I overheard one consular officer saying to another: "It's that doubleedged sword again." He meant that as a holder of a Letter of Invitation from a university I could come up with an idea to stay in Germany as a refugee or in some other way. This fear the West European officials had of us travellers from the Eastern Europe was quite common. Nevertheless, I was granted a visa.

Did it take a long time?

No, it did not. The whole procedure made one feel very awkward though. And one more thing: the rule of thumb in those days was that one could not apply for a visa abroad. I was living in the States between 1985 and 1986, on a one-year scholarship, as a guest researcher. Going there I had no problems with a visa for the US. When I was to return to Hungary though I wanted to visit West Germany on the way home. I went to the West German Consulate in New York to get a visa. I was told to apply for it in Hungary. I informed the Consular Officer that I was on a scholarship, and my mother was living in Germany so I wanted to visit her on my way home. I got the visa, finally, but not without some difficulties. The visa for France was yet more difficult to get. I could not rely on the fact that my mother was living in the West, nor could I present any papers from her that would help matters. So, the French Consular Officer asked me where I was intending to stay. I got annoyed with her and said: "Have you ever been to Paris?" "I am from Paris", she replied with some resentfulness in her voice. So I said: "You must know then that there are many hotels there. When I arrive in Paris I will choose one that I like and can afford, and will stay there for a week. We are in New York now. How on Earth should I know which hotel I'm going to stay at?" In the end she started to laugh and said: "OK. I will grant you a visa." I think that it is more difficult for a non-EU citizen to enter the EU than it was for us, Eastern Europeans, to go to the West from behind the Iron Curtain.

By the end of September 1986, my passport had been withdrawn and I was banned from travelling abroad for five years. I was declared an "unworthy citizen" of the People's Republic of Hungary. The meaning of this term was never explained to me. So I decided to publish an article about it in "Beszélő". In it I appealed to all those who had found themselves in a similar situation to write to me. Thus, in the 21st issue of "Beszélő" that

appeared in the autumn of 1987 I was able to present an article about similar cases. In it I reported on 28 Hungarian citizens who had also been stripped of their right to travel abroad without good reason. A citizen of a so-called "socialist state" needed a visa for each Western country he or she wanted to visit. I didn't usually have problems getting a visa. But we all used to face many bureaucratic hurdles, not only from domestic authorities, but from foreign ones too.

Do you recall your experiences crossing the border to the West for the first time?

I don't know whether Yugoslavia could be considered to be a Western country or not but this was the first country I had visited. It was in 1956. I was only 17 then. We were to visit my mother's cousin. I had relatives in many countries. This journey was fantastic. I saw the sea and Dubrovnik for the first time. I went across the real border into the West in 1962. I did not have any problems but nevertheless I was nervous. I was always nervous crossing the border when I was travelling as a tourist.

Were you ever ill treated, or discriminated against by the authorities of any Western European State?

No, I was not – really. I can tell you some interesting stories, though. For example, travellers from the Soviet Block were allowed to leave France only through the designated crossing points. We were travelling from France to Switzerland by car at night. Our three children were asleep. We were very tired so we decided to take the shortest route. The French border guard didn't let us through, though. I tried to make him change his mind, telling him that we were tired and that our children were asleep in the car. In the end I was not successful and thus we had to drive another 100 km to the appropriate crossing point. Of course, he couldn't help it. He had to follow the rules.

Most of the Western European countries already had by then a mutual visa-free agreement. I was travelling from West Germany to Denmark by ferry. On the border, they just signalled everyone to pass through. But I needed an exit stamp in my passport. Eastern Europeans did not frequent that border crossing point that often though. Thus the officer couldn't find the proper stamp. The others standing behind me were getting annoyed and the border guards were getting angry having to look for the stamp. They did find it in the end. Inconveniences of that kind were quite common in those days. And often, one felt strange being suspected of doing something wrong.

On another occasion I was to return to Hungary from West Germany. I wanted to take a train to Hungary from East Berlin because it would be much cheaper. I was travelling to West Berlin by train. I intended to stay there for two or three days. As I reached the border, the West German border guard wanted to place an exit stamp in my passport. I asked him pleadingly: "Don't do this please. I would like to spend a few days in West Berlin". He replied: "You are leaving West German territory now so I have to put a stamp in your passport. You will be able to enter West Berlin anyway, should you want to do so". I then said: "With that exit stamp in my passport I could stay in West Berlin for years. Who would know?" The guard smiled ironically and said: "Don't worry. We have ways of checking."

Did you manage to establish any connections or friendships in the West that proved to be useful in your latter career and life?

As a matter of fact, yes I did. I managed to establish many such connections and friendships and I learned a lot thanks to all my studies and work there. For example, the Heidelberg Scholarship proved to be very useful. The courses were very interesting. We analysed literary works and held many interesting debates. The atmosphere was freer than at the University of Vienna. I also spent almost a year in the US, as a guest researcher. I attended a class about the US Constitution. All these experiences and contacts proved to be very useful, both in my professional career and in my life. For example, when I was a member of the democratic opposition and worked as one of the editors of "Beszélő" I visited the US State Department and the White House as though I was a politician. I could talk about the political situation in Eastern and Central Europe, and especially in Hungary, knowing the mentality of the other side. I also benefited from my contacts among Hungarian émigrés. I used to give lectures at universities and for the Hungarians too. Travelling is really important for one's development. It means a lot when one can spend time abroad, either as a student or as a worker. If you go abroad for only two weeks, you will only get superficial impressions. ••

Inside the consulate of an EU Member State in Kyiv.
November 2008.

Inside the consulate of an EU Member State in Kyiv.
November 2008.

Liliya

from Ukraine

Liliya, 21. She is a student and a journalist from Kyiv. In her spare time she likes to dance. She has visited the Czech Republic and Poland thus far. This photograph was taken when she was applying for a visa to participate in a student-exchange programme.

"'Why does it have to be like this?' I did not understand this question, at first. When it was posed on yet another occasion I realised that it was a valid question. 'Why?' Could one not function in some other way? Why did we tolerate all of this? I was discovering another point of view."

Janusz Onyszkiewicz from Poland

About

was born in 1937 in Lviv (then Poland, and now Ukraine). He holds a PhD in mathematics. He is well known in Poland and abroad, mainly for his activities as an opposition leader during the seventies and eighties and now as a politician. During the eighties he was involved in establishing the Solidarity structures in Mazowsze Province. He was also a spokesman for Solidarity. He was interned during Martial Law imposed on 13 December 1981. During the first free parliamentary elections in Poland since the Second World War (in 1989) he was elected to the Sejm [the Lower House of the Polish Parliament]. He was an MP until 2001. In 2004-2009 he was a Member of the European Parliament where he was elected a Vice-President (2004-2007). In addition he has twice held the post of Polish National Defence Minister. His passion is mountaineering. He was a member of many expeditions to the Tatras, the Alps, and the Himalayas.

photograph: private archives/ During a trip to Tatra Mountains

An interview
with Janusz Onyszkiewicz

Since the sixties you used to travel as a scientist or a sportsman (mountaineer). What were your impressions of your first trip to the West?

My first contact with the West imprinted itself on my memory well: I went with a group of other students to the Netherlands in 1959. It was a meeting with another world. First, the Netherlands gave one the impression of theatrical scenery: the cleanliness, striking freshness. I was looking at old buildings and admiring how well kept they were. However, back then, Poland looked different.

Next – in 1960 – I went to Italy with a group of friends and looked at this other world, the Western World, through a car window (we were hitchhiking). This car window was for us a borderline, both literally and figuratively. We were limited, primarily, by the scarcity of our financial resources, and could not avail ourselves fully of the opportunities offered by the West. We could only spend a dollar a day per person. Therefore we could not afford to go to a restaurant – nor have dinner or even a coffee. We could not afford to use public facilities along motorways either. It was a nightmare. Therefore, when I was travelling, I felt best when I was a sportsman. When I had a sleeping bag I could feel independent. I used to feel then that I was invincible. But it was only in the mountains that I did not feel inferior towards those who owned a Fiat or some other Western make of car. I felt comfortable here because I knew that this is my world and not the world of those who drive a Mercedes Benz.

Wasn't the contrast between communist Poland and the West shocking? Poland was considered in the West to be a part of the USSR.

O yes! We felt some sadness, because when one bought a guidebook to Europe, Europe used to end at Elbe River. Such guidebooks did not cover countries such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, or Hungary. Some more alternative guidebooks though covered Yugoslavia, but Poland was not considered to be a part of Europe at all then. Furthermore, we were afraid that during the journey Italians would think that we are communists and thus would treat us badly. When we were hitchhiking around Italy and were telling people that we were from Poland, very often, the reaction we got was: "Oh! You are Communists". We were identified with the system under which we were living so we had to explain the true shape of the communism in our country.

What bureaucratic formalities did you have to go through to be able to travel?

First of all, every Polish passport was valid only for a specific territory, for example, for Yugoslavia or Europe only.

As for trips to the West, Poles needed to have a Letter of Invitation. Such a letter had to include a guarantee that all the costs of the stay would be covered, including medical expenses, by the party providing the Invitation. Therefore, it was not easy to obtain. One had to ask someone, whom more often than not one barely knew, to include in a Letter of Invitation a declaration to that effect but fortunately, more often than not, I used to manage to obtain such a document. We had problems though. Letters of invitation we got from the West were official in character: they were drawn up on the official stationary of the institution concerned whereas Polish authorities required that they bear a special stamp – and this was quite an impediment. Several times I had to ask some Western European institution to have such a stamp made especially for me.

The obtainment of a Letter of Invitation was only a first step. What other experiences with the visa application procedure did you have?

The obtainment of a visa to a Western European country, the US, or even a country like Afghanistan involved a lot of bureaucratic formalities. The visa procedures were lengthy and cumbersome so one had to be patient. The cost of a visa was, although not exorbitant, nevertheless significant. Definitely, matters were somewhat made easier by the fact that visa fees were payable in the Polish currency.

Was travelling to the West not associated with having to wait in queues outside embassies and consulates?

That's true. Queues outside consulates were always rather long. Waiting there, one could exchange tips on how to take care of everything in the quickest way: where applications are processed quicker and where slower, at which bank queues are shorter to buy the allotted five US dollars. This was exactly the staggering amount that our People's Republic allowed us to take abroad for a single journey. It was irritating that representatives of travel agencies were entering without having to wait in a long queue, carrying large batches of visa applications or passports to be stamped.

Did any Western country ever refuse you entry? Or were their bureaucratic formalities so extensive that you did not manage to obtain a visa?

I remember an attempt – ultimately successful – to travel to Spain. I applied for a Spanish visa in France because in those days Spain did not have diplomatic representation in Poland because Poland did not maintain diplomatic relations with that country. When I tried to get this visa, the Spanish consular officer told me at the outset: "No way!" I was informed that I should not even bother to submit an application because nobody from Poland would get a visa for Spain. The communists – and we were all considered to be communists then – were not granted visas. The Spanish, therefore, didn't feel that they had to give us any explanation. The answer was: "No, and that's that." But luckily, knowing the right people helped and finally I did get that visa. I was really surprised, though, when it was finally stamped into my passport.

The biggest problem everybody had in those days was with the obtainment of a US visa. The application forms were extensive, with many strange questions. For example: "Do you intend to murder the US President?" There were even questions addressed especially to women such as: "Are you travelling, by any chance, to be involved in prostitution?" Such scrutinising of prospective travellers was taking place because if someone were to actually murder the US President there would be a reason to cancel the rascal's visa. Why? Because the person involved had obtained it by providing false information and making false declarations. Therefore, filling in such forms was somewhat embarrassing.

How long did one have to wait for a visa?

The waiting period was very long – several weeks – unless the reasons for having to travel were urgent, like the death of a relative abroad. Luckily, I never found myself in such a situation so I do not know how quickly a visa would be issued. As far as visas are concerned, I had it somewhat easier than others did as my wife, Alison, who has later died in the Himalayas was British. I could even have obtained British citizenship if I had wanted to but I did not feel like it. When I arrived in the United Kingdom for the first time, a work permit was issued to me straight away. Living in the UK, I was also issued a document with which I could renew my Polish passport. I was issued the so-called travel document. It resembled a passport but it was not one. Based on this document the British authorities were asking authorities of other countries to facilitate travel for the holder but that did not, of course, apply to Poland.

The Polish side caused many difficulties. I remember planning a visit to the UK in 1973 as a scientist. I even had a passport already, lying in a drawer, with a British visa stamped in it. Meanwhile, on Friday I received a phone call from the University to return this passport quickly. I asked whether I could return it on Monday to which I received a reply that "Yes, I can do that" so I quickly packed my bags and left Poland.

Another such example involves my expedition to K2. I was to travel on a sportsman's passport for which I applied through the agency of the Central Committee for Physical Culture and Tourism. Our secretary discreetly enquired whether my passport was still at this institution or whether it had been withdrawn. At the end, I received the passport and the day before the departure – I was leaving the country earlier than all the other members of our expedition because I was to make various preparations at our destination – the secretary received a phone call from someone who asked: "When is Mr. Onyszkiewicz leaving the country?", to which she replied lying, of course, that I had already left, following which she accompanied me to the airport to see whether I could get through the gate untroubled. She told me nothing about this phone call at the time so as not to make me nervous. I was able to leave. I think that the Polish security services' operation was based on public information. They knew when members of the expedition were to leave and did not realise that I was to fly earlier. I had many adventures like that.

Would your career have developed in the way it did if you hadn't travelled?

It would have been more difficult for me. Certainly, thanks to my travelling I was able to learn English well. I was able to have real contact with this language. All the discussions at the University were held in English but the mathematical vocabulary is limited and thus it is easy to learn this terminology and discuss mathematical problems in English whereas, thanks to my travels, I was able to learn everyday English. Knowing English meant that when Solidarity was established I could lead press conferences in English. In addition, I was able to acquaint myself with the West a bit. For example, thanks to the conversations that I had with West Germans I could discover what Western people really thought and felt. Polish propaganda was all the time bombarding us with clichés that West Germans were revisionists who thought of nothing else but how to deprive Poles of their lands. Of course, I did not buy into this at all but during conversations I had with them I had an opportunity to discover how much some of them were committed to reconciliation with us, Poles. Later, travelling to the West, I visited them, spoke with them – and what for me was very important – discovered that the situation in the West was completely different from the one that was shown on our television screens.

Did your travels afford you also an opportunity to learn the rules of democracy and the free market economy?

I benefited not only from travelling but also from marrying Alison. We lived in Poland and my wife – a Westerner – used to ask me all the time: "Why does it have to be like this?" I did not understand this question, at first. When it was posed on yet another occasion I realised that it was a valid question. "Why?" Could one not function in some other way? Why did we tolerate all of this? I was discovering another point of view. My eyes were being opened to some things that we treated as natural because we had learned to be humble.

When I stayed in England there were local government elections. My friend proposed that I participate in an election campaign for one of the candidates. In Poland one would call him a prospective councillor. It was fascinating to observe this election campaign, the election mechanisms in a democratic country. In those days, representatives of the Labour Party used to lose in every constituency and the only candidate from this party that won a seat against a Conservative was the very candidate I worked for. Therefore, the rumour spread around that an expert had come from Poland and had taken care of things. My role in this whole process was, in fact, very humble indeed. Therefore, this was of course only a joke.

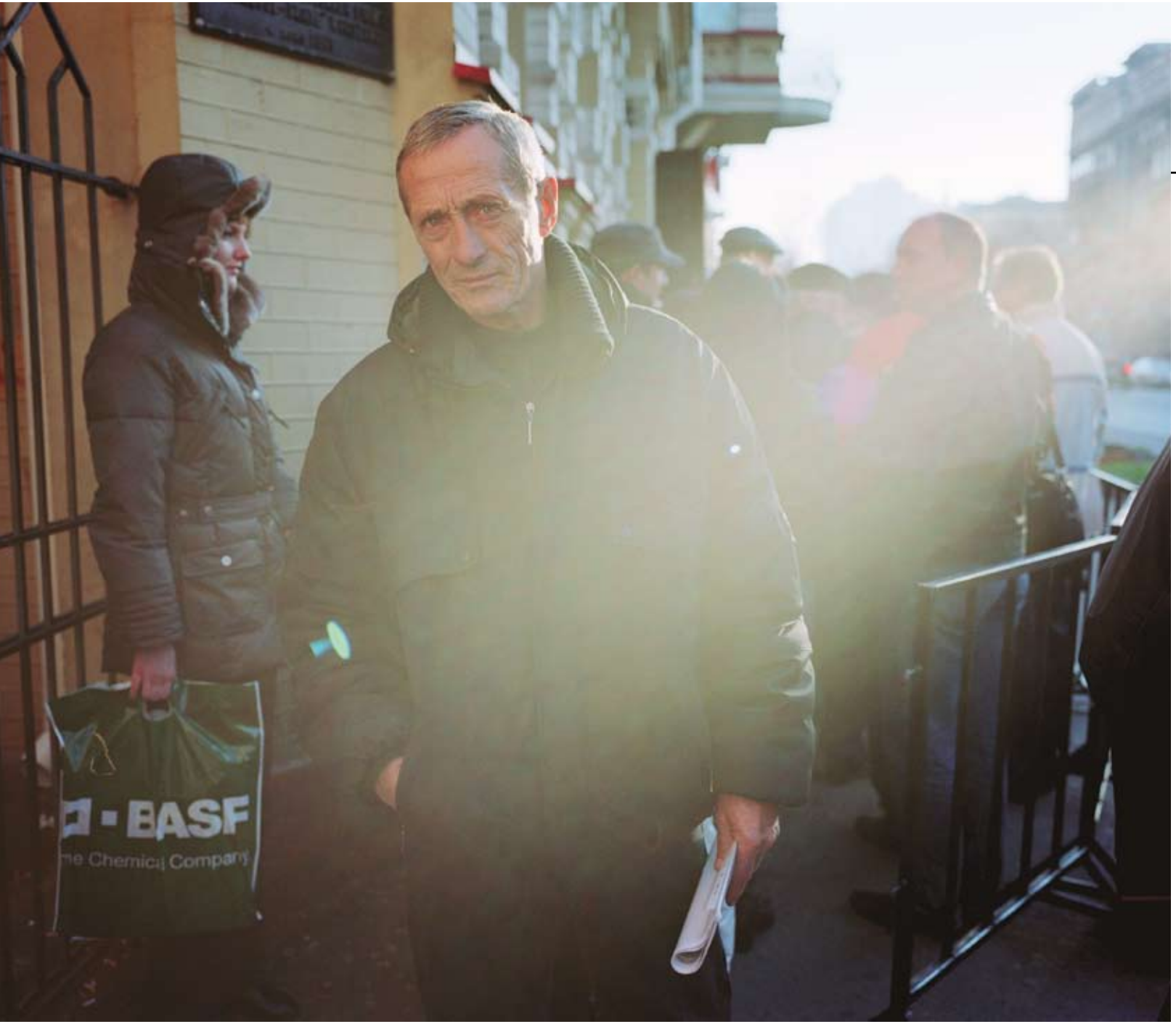
Did the lessons learned in the West prove to be helpful in your subsequent political activity?

Thanks to all these contacts I learned how to engage in a dialogue with our Western interlocutors. I was able to understand their way of thinking. It was also easier for me to explain to them various issues than it would have been if I were only limited by my experiences of living in communist Poland. These experiences were very useful when I became a Solidarity spokesman.

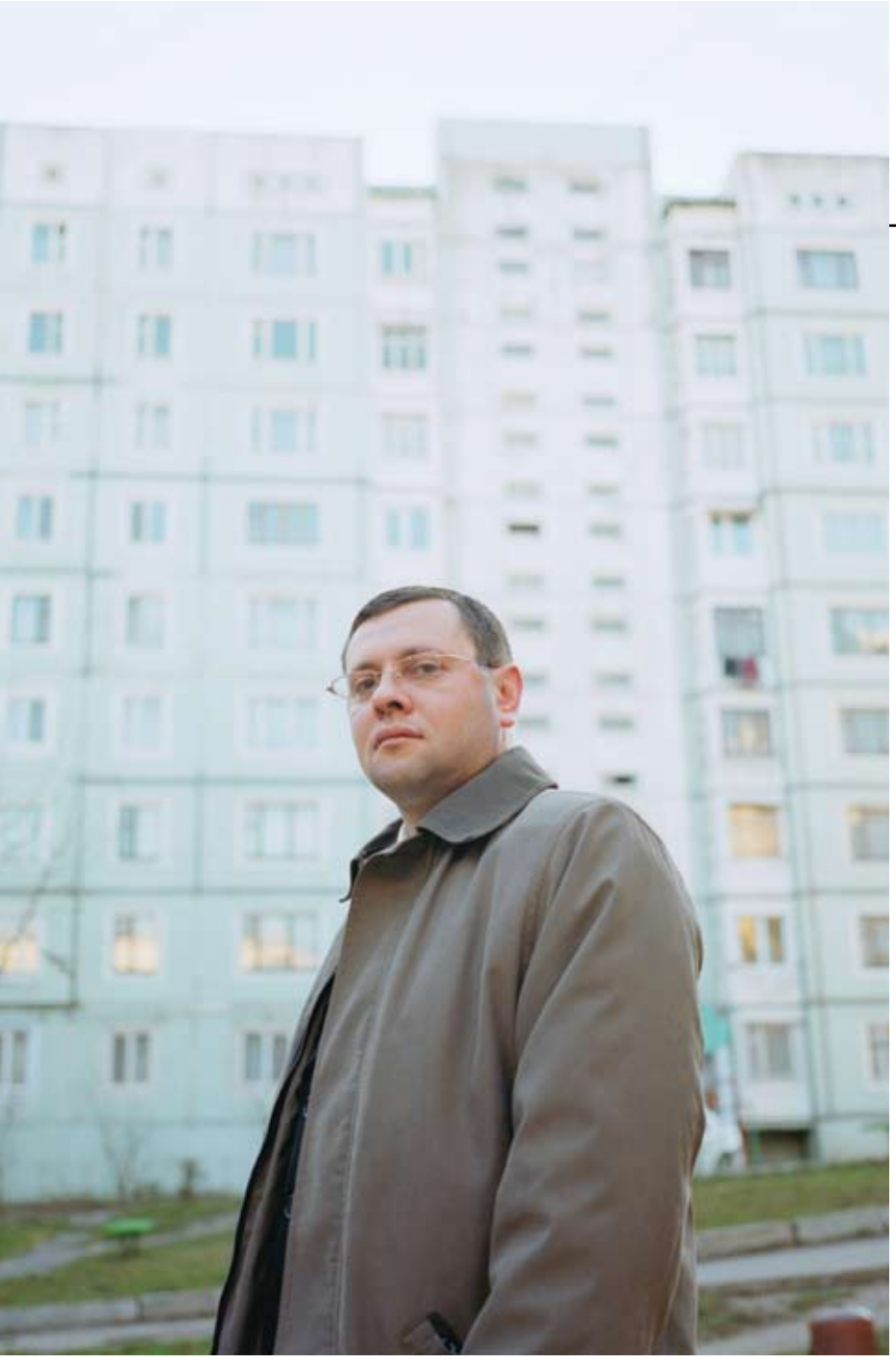
Authorities of communist Poland used to claim that the fact that opposition activists could go abroad showed that Poland was an open country.

I ceased to be a sportsman because of politics. When I was interned under Martial Law I had a dilemma because my friends were preparing a major K2 expedition. K2 was a mountain I had a score to settle with. I knew that if I were to reveal my wish to participate in this expedition, the authorities would give me a passport, not necessarily hoping that I would die on this mountain but that I would not come back to Poland. And should I return they would be able to say, calmly: "What's the matter? Here you are! Mr. Onyszkiewicz wanted to leave and he was able to do so. What's this whole commotion about that the opposition is treated badly"?

Citizens of Belarus and Ukraine should be able to obtain Schengen visas free of charge. Poland has large scope for entering into bilateral agreements with these countries – even within the Schengen regime. Poland could enlarge the group of people covered by the visa-facilitation regime. We should be able to do that. Let us be generous towards our neighbours in that respect. I've tried to push the necessary regulations through the European Parliament but to no avail thus far. Europe is afraid of illegal immigration but in reality citizens of Belarus and Ukraine pose no threat in that regard. ••



Outside the consulate of an EU Member State in Kyiv.
November 2008.



Pavel in his home town Balti.
November 2008.

Pavel

from Moldova

Pavel, 32. He is a doctor working for a pharmaceutical company. He lives with his wife and child in Balti, a town in North Moldova. This photograph was taken there. He likes to play computer games in his spare time. As for the EU, he has only visited Hungary so far. His company sent him to Budapest. Thus, they helped him with all the formalities and covered the expenses involved. He feels that the most difficult element of the visa-application procedure is the need to collect all the necessary documents. He also complained about the long wait for a final decision. He believes that it is much more difficult to obtain a visa when one is travelling for private reasons than when on business. He would like to go to Italy to do some sightseeing and visit his family.

"I would return to Poland with these spoils from the West and knew that I would be welcomed with an explosion of happiness at home, the intensity of which I have never seen since."

Jacek Ostaszewski from Poland

About

was born in 1944 in Krakow, Poland. He is a musician, composer and author of unique method of musical training – The Way of Sound. Together with Marek Jackowski and Tomasz Hołuj he established Osjan, a music group well known in Europe during the seventies. He is considered to be one of the forerunners of World Music. As a jazz musician he cooperated with many well-known musicians in Poland, including Tomasz Stańko, Andrzej Trzaskowski, and Krzysztof Komeda. Apart from Osjan, he was also a member of the Anawa group, cooperaiting with Marek Grechuta. Currently, he mainly composes music for theatre and teaches at the State Higher School of Theatre in Krakow.

photograph: private archives

An interview
with Jacek Ostaszewski

The music group you co-created – Osjan – was quite well known and quite well received in the West. Poland was in the Soviet Block back then. How did musicians from behind the Iron Curtain build their careers abroad?

I started to travel to the West quite early on in the sixties. I used to travel with Polish jazz groups then. The first time I crossed the border into the West was when I went to Nuremberg. I went there with Andrzej Trzaskowski to play at a jazz festival. In those days jazz musicians had a somewhat privileged position in Poland: we were allowed to leave the country to play. When I was very young, jazz was considered by the authorities to be base capitalist music but this changed somewhat later on as they discovered that jazz was derived from the tradition of poor, oppressed Afro-Americans and that somehow fitted well with communist propaganda that stressed capitalist exploitation in America. Therefore, jazz was not glamorised by the communist authorities but was tolerated. And thus jazz festivals started to be held in communist Poland too.

During the seventies I used to travel with Osjan – primarily to Germany – but our first trip to the West was to Italy. Osjan was operating within the realities of communist Poland in a very specific way. One day we received an invitation to play in Opole, at a large official Polish music festival. Olga Lipińska orchestrated this. Lipińska had to appear before many a decision-maker to explain why we were to play there. We did not fit in with the so-called socialist culture but then we were not artists singing protest songs – like Jacek Kaczmarski or Przemysław Gintrowski – either. We were at the forefront of what was latterly known as the Orange Alternative that was prone to make fun of communist Poland and its realities rather than to go in for the martyrdom as it were. We were considered a bit mad; it would be better not to invite them because one never knows what will happen. We did not have problems with travelling abroad until Martial Law was imposed (in 1981), apart from some typical problems such as with the obtainment of a visa or a passport.

Was it an ordeal for you dealing with bureaucratic formalities?

It is easier for me to talk about the seventies when I was travelling with Osjan. Back in the days of communist Poland, an artist could only leave the country with the help of the Polish Artists' Agency "PAGART", i.e. the institution responsible, among other things, for arranging passports for artists. To travel we had to have an official passport. It was likely that the staff of this institution performed simultaneously two functions: they were to deal with issues relating to culture, on the one hand, and to cooperate closely with the secret service, on the other. PAGART was also responsible for booking our performances in the West and yet throughout all the years of our cooperation with them they never booked us anywhere. However we had to pay them a large percentage of all the royalties we received for performing in the West only because PAGART was involved in obtaining our passports and visas.

How long did one have to wait for a visa?

The procedures were lengthy and therefore one had to plan one's trip well in advance – one had to wait at least three months. Sometimes it was easier to get a passport – which one could not keep at home, in a drawer, but was stored at PAGART – than to obtain a visa. Upon return, one had to surrender one's passport forthwith to PAGART. There was a specific time limit for this: three months. The countries we were to perform in were also running their own checks on us. In those days there was mutual distrust.

Which Western European countries were involved? What was this lack of trust about? What did these checks on prospective visitors from the Soviet Block involve?

Though our luggage was rarely checked, when it did happen we were "questioned" thoroughly. And then the attitude of customs officers towards us... I also remember our visit to a labour office in Switzerland where we had to appear in person to receive a work permit: a huge queue, primarily made up of newcomers from Africa and Asia, some humiliating enquires

and questions. Nobody, though, could compete with customs officers from East Germany and it was impossible to travel to the West without crossing that border.

As I have already said, I used to travel with jazz groups to West Germany during the sixties. We used to also play in Belgium. With Osjan I went to Italy – in the first half of the seventies. Then there was Switzerland. We used to hitchhike there – every member of the group by himself – because we did not have enough money for a ticket. People in the West had no understanding whatsoever of the strange realities behind the Iron Curtain; they could not comprehend that a professional musician was not able to afford a bus or train fare.

Were there any instances where you felt that you were treated inhumanely in the West?

There is one such instance and here I see some analogy with the way Ukrainian citizens are treated today. Our agent did not expect that after giving a concert in Germany we would not be able to arrive at the border crossing on time. The concert was in the evening and the border crossing was quite far. We did not get to this crossing on time yet out visas were valid only until midnight of that day. We arrived there approximately one hour late. At the border, German officers kicked up a tremendous row. We were kept at gunpoint as if we were some criminals. We were ordered to put our hands up. We were informed that we were in Germany illegally because our visas had expired.

How did it end? Did anyone apologise once the matter was clarified?

Please, don't joke with me...

Did anyone in the West made you feel that you were inferior, that you were "these poor Poles"?

First, we did not suffer from an inferiority complex of any kind. Goods available in the West were not seductive to me: they did not arouse any passion or fascination in me. I was already well advanced in Buddhist training. Of course, we knew that we were invited to the West as Osjan to perform as a group from a poor part of Europe – perhaps a little bit out of compassion – but we did not buy into this. We spoke English. We did not have a problem with communication. We knew Western literature and music. We did not consider ourselves to be culturally that different. It's true that life was a little bit more difficult for us than for Westerners: we could not afford to sleep in a hotel so we used to be put up by friends. We were not travelling with technicians but instead we had to carry our loudspeakers ourselves. We felt though that physical labour is the right path, rather than building up a myth of an artist.

Did these travels to the West help you in your career?

First of all, the West gave us a sense of diversity and calmness, and that was precious to us. We knew that nobody would break the door to our house down, as happened once when we were living in Warsaw: the State Police (Milicja) broke in one night. My wife Małgosia was in an advanced stage of pregnancy then. They blinded us with their flashlights... It happened because we were living in Warsaw illegally i.e. without being registered as new tenants as required by the authorities. I knew that in the West something like that could not have happened without a seriously good reason. While we were in the West we fell into all kinds of circles, as we gave concerts in all kinds of places.

Was there any country that refused you entry?

Generally, we did not have problems with getting a visa. However, once we crossed the border we felt that yes, we were citizens of Europe, but of a "C" category. I'm thinking here, above all, about border checks. When one was leaving Poland and entering East Germany, and next the West, the borders were heavily guarded.

And what about the checks on the goods you were taking out of the country?

Of course – as I have already mentioned – sometimes our luggage was subjected to thorough checks where our bags were emptied out and this was especially true of Polish and East German customs officers.

Did your travels help you to acquaint yourself with the rules of democracy and the free market?

We did not take any courses in the West. We simply observed

that world. We saw that their economy – not being based on planning but on a free market – was functioning completely differently than ours, that it was much, much better, that people had a different mentality. After giving a few concerts we had some western currencies in our pockets. It wasn't a lot, though for us it seemed to be a fortune because back in Poland this money had enormous value. The West used to appreciate us more than our countrymen. Osjan was going through a period when indeed it was more popular in the West than in Poland.

Was your first contact with the West shocking?

Of course it was. When I used to leave for the West I was given an extensive list of things to buy. Thus I knew the sizes of shoes, clothes, and underwear of my entire family. I remember that once – returning from a concert tour – I even brought a full can of soy oil on my back. I had bought it for my family but then my wife shared it with our friends, in many small bottles.

Once you crossed the border you left behind the socialist-realist greyness and entered fireworks of lights and advertisements. Shops were filled to the brim with goods while in Poland they were completely empty. I was running around with a shopping list trying to buy everything as cheaply as possible – it was quite tiring. I would return to Poland with these spoils from the West and knew that I would be welcomed with an explosion of happiness at home, the intensity of which I have never seen since. My children could savour real chocolate or bananas for the very first time. Once I even brought – from Greece – oranges and a barrel of olives. After each trip to the West it was as if I was Santa Claus. Money would disappear quite soon. We were always on this financial seesaw. One day we had money and the next, there was none.

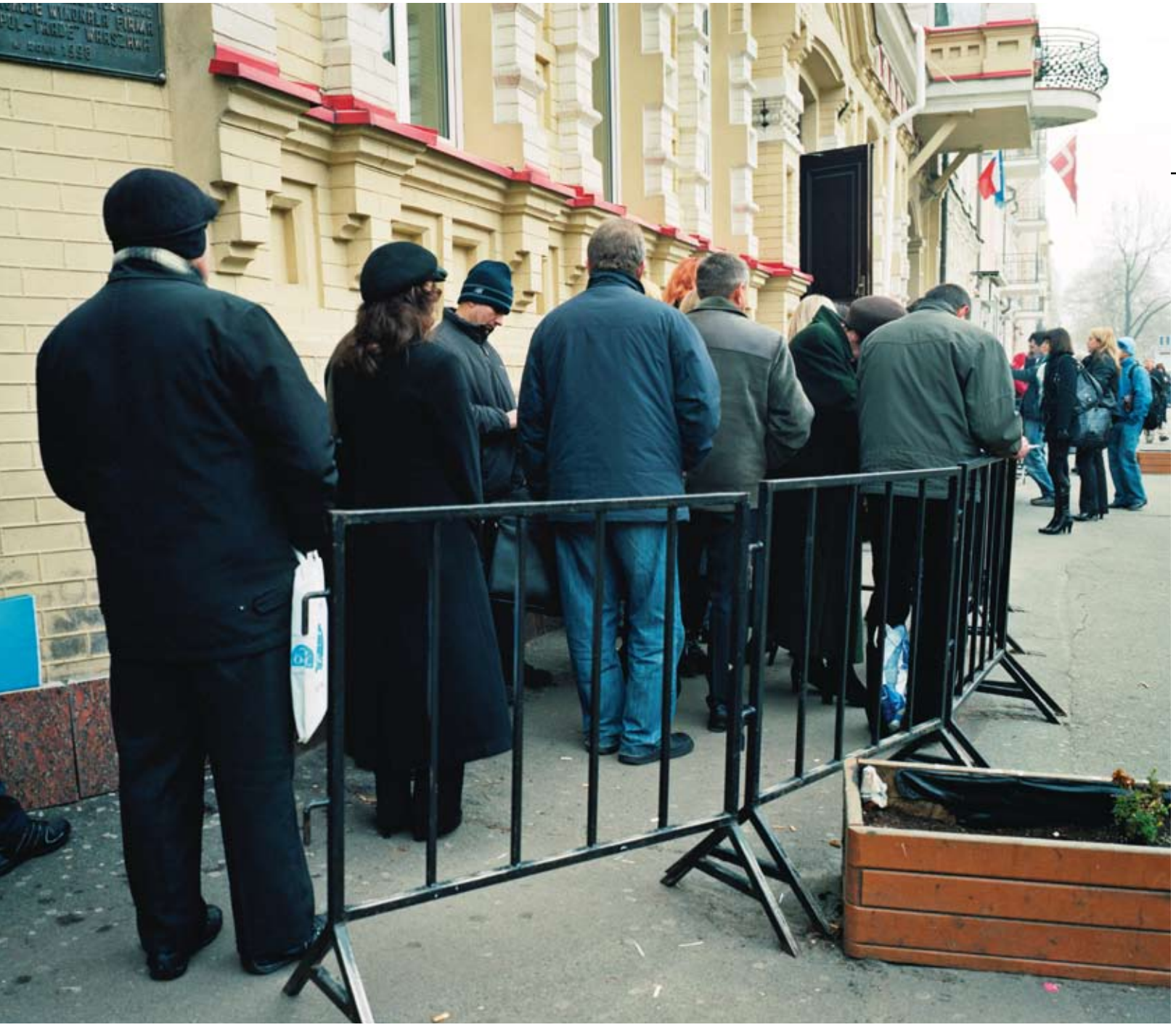
Did the friendships established in those days still survive until today?

I am in contact with the people that I met then. We meet from time to time.

And what about professional contacts?

Professional contacts were severed due to Martial Law. These days I travel to the West as a composer of theatre music. Sometimes I give concerts with Zbigniew Preisner.

The truth is also that our outlook on the West is now different. This is the result of the democratic changes in Poland. ••



Queuing is a constant element of the visa-application process.
November 2008.

Inside the consulate of an EU Member State in Kyiv.
November 2008.

Ekaterina

from Ukraine

Ekaterina, 18. She studies marketing in Kyiv. Her interests include theatre, dancing, and writing. This photograph was taken when she was waiting for a visa in a consulate. She wants to go to Poland. It will be her first trip to the EU. She considers consular staff to be very kind. She complained, though, about the long queue outside the consulate in which she had to wait even though it was very cold.

"Westerners were more direct, more relaxed. They were not afraid of others. One could talk freely to anyone and meet, in a single workplace, many interesting people from different countries. Such an atmosphere was totally unknown to us."

Petr Pajas
from the Czech Republic

About

was born in 1938, in Třinec (then Czechoslovakia, and now the Czech Republic). He is a physicist and mathematician by education. Expelled from his institute in 1972, he was forced to work as a transportation systems analyst (until 1989). After November 1989, he became well known as a leading NGO spokesperson and an expert on the NGO legal environment. In 1992 he cofounded and became the Executive Director of a company providing consultancy services to NGOs. From 1995 to 2000 he was the Deputy Director of the Centre for Democracy and Free Enterprise in Prague. He held several senior NGO posts, including that of the Executive Director of the Czechoslovak Charta 77 Foundation (1989-1992), the Executive Director of the Office for Establishing the Central European University in Prague (1991-1993), and the Executive Director of the Institute of Municipal Informatics of Prague (1993-1995).

photograph: PASOS

An interview
with Petr Pajas

Could you tell me a bit about your first trips to the West?

I started to travel to the West relatively early on, first as a student, and then as an employee of the Institute of Nuclear Research. Already back then, in the early sixties, study-abroad programmes in the West for physicists and scientists in general started to develop. And our Institute succeeded in establishing cooperation with an Institute in France, where I spent nearly a year. That was quite a formative experience. I was able to go there virtually every year, until 1968; that was the last time I was able to go.

Did you visit other countries too?

I visited Italy. One could cross the border into Yugoslavia rather easily. Once there, Czechoslovak citizens were allowed by the Yugoslav authorities to travel further. Otherwise, you were allowed to travel only as a private person, on a special permit that you were able to obtain only once a decade.

When did you go abroad for the first time?

In 1964.

So you used to travel to the West from 1964 until 1968?

Yes, I did. I was also able to leave even in 1969. I went to the UK with the help of my Institute. And stayed there until March. It was then that I made a very bad decision to return to Czechoslovakia. On my way back, when I crossed the border between Germany and Czechoslovakia, I saw soldiers everywhere and had a feeling that everything had gone badly wrong, although the borders were still open at the turn of 1968 to 1969. The self-immolation of Jan Palach took place when I was in the UK. This was a very dramatic event. For me, it meant returning to a devastated country.

And there followed a tightening by the regime?

That did not actually come about until April 1969. I lost my job. I was sacked from the Institute along with several others.

Did you have to sign a statement that you approved of the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact armies?

Whilst being dismissed, I was presented with two documents to sign: one relating to voluntary resignation, subject to their finding me a job somewhere else, and the other, a plain dismissal. I chose to sign the latter. It meant that from that point on my life wasn't going to be easy. But I have no regrets.

Were you able to go abroad after that?

I never even tried as a private person to go through the procedure of applying to the Local Council and receiving permission to travel on my own, without my family, and then, at best, only to Yugoslavia. We went to East Germany and to Poland though. That was just about possible.

One had to obtain the permission from the country in question first though?

Well, there was the possibility of getting a visa and a passport. But having a visa from the country one wished to visit was not enough. One had to have the so-called "exit permit" which authorised the holder to cross the Czechoslovak border, and committed him or her to return.

How did one go about getting a visa? Was it difficult to get one?

It was a normal visa procedure meaning one approached the consulate in question. The consulate usually took two to three weeks to process an application and issue a visa.

Was there a time when things were relatively relaxed as far as travelling was concerned?

Yes, there was – early 1969. It was great. There was a feeling among us Czechoslovaks that we were all in the same boat. And we were communicating with each other in a normal manner.

Communication between us was great. In fact, many people were allowed to leave the country even without any documents, including all these exit permits. None of them were necessary.

But then didn't the regime use the forced emigration to get rid of dissidents?

Yes, they did that too. But then they had already used that method during the fifties. However, they were more active in this respect during the period of the so-called "normalisation".

What are your memories of your first trip abroad?

The difference between our country and the West in the sixties was not so immense as one might think. It involved mainly differences between the cuisine and the mentality of the people. Westerners were more direct, more relaxed. They were not afraid of others. One could talk freely to anyone and meet, in a single workplace, many interesting people from different countries. Such an atmosphere was totally unknown to us. Then, during the seventies, each time one left the country one was wondering whether to return to Czechoslovakia or stay permanently abroad. Each time you had to assure your wife and parents that you were going to come back, that you were not going to stay in the West permanently.

What did you expect of the West before your first journey there? And were your expectations matched by the reality?

Firstly, I used to travel to the West as a researcher, and thus to work there. The moment you arrived at an Institute someone took care of you. I was assigned a desk. There was a minimum of red tape. I was free to do my work.

So you had an opportunity to observe everyday life there?

I had a lot of good moments. I was young, mind you, but I still spent most of my time at my desk.

Did you become aware of democracy and the freedom when you were in the West in the sixties?

Certainly, I did. The difference between them and us was that nobody told you what to do and nobody controlled you. You did everything of your own free will. You would see people demonstrating in the street, expressing agreement or dissent. And all of that took place without any intervention from the authorities.

There is much talk, nowadays, of the advantages of the Schengen Zone. There are two contrasting tendencies though. There is the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership, with their declared priority to foster human relations across borders. And on the other hand, there is a rather restrictive Schengen regime. Do you think these tendencies could become amalgamated one day into one, resulting, for example, in the abolition of visa fees?

I hope so. I feel that there are categories of travellers – such as students or those wishing to visit for a short time – who should be entitled to pay a lower fee, or be able to obtain a visa free of charge. Naturally, for economic reasons there is a strong desire to derive revenues from issuing visas but it is important for citizens of the Eastern Partnership countries to have this financial barrier reduced.

During the seventies and eighties, people started to draw conclusions about the differences between the East and the West, and find out about democracy, and free market economy. That is, of course, if they were able to go abroad.

That means an added value in that we were able to share this experience with our European partners when we were negotiating with them. It enabled us to tell them what helped us in various ways.

Yes, it's true. For example, we were able to dispel their fears of an excessive influx of labour from the East. In reality, their fear of this is completely unfounded because from an economic point of view it's not a problem at all. The Schengen regime can't protect us from certain risks anyway. People can still get here illegally if they want to. As I have said, a reasonable policy would be to grant visas free of charge to those that qualify, those who need to travel for a specific purpose. Nevertheless, we need some degree of protection. ••

Outside the consulate of an EU Member State in Kyiv.
November 2008.

Outside the consulate of an EU Member State in Chisinau.
November 2008.

Vaceslav

from Moldova

Vaceslav, 34. He lives in Gordinesti, in North Moldova. He is married and has one child. He used to visit France often, importing cars from there. This photograph was taken when he has just found out that he would not be able to go to Slovenia because his visa-application had been denied. To apply, he had to come in person to a consulate in Chisinau, located more than 150 km from Gordinesti.

"I went to the West for the first time in 1989. I was 37. This first encounter with the West gave me a shock from which I have never really recovered, in a way."

Jan Ruml
from the Czech Republic

About

was born in 1953 in Prague (then Czechoslovakia, now the Czech Republic). After finishing High School he tried to enrol, several times, at a university but was rejected for political reasons. He worked, in turn, as a stoker, dispatcher, logger, machine operator, bookseller, and hospital attendant. In February 1977 he signed Charter 77. In 1979 he became a member of the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Persecuted (VONS). Between May 1981 and March 1982 he was detained for supposed anti-state activity. He was also involved in the work of the Provisional Co-ordinating Committee of the Movement for Civic Freedom. He co-founded the underground "Lidové noviny" and "Respekt". At the beginning of 1990 he became a spokesperson for Charter 77. In April 1990 he was appointed Deputy Minister of the Interior of the Czechoslovak Federal Republic. From 1992 to 1997 he held the posts of the Minister of the Interior of the Czech Republic and the Head of the Government Task Force on Refugees. He was also a Senator.

photograph: private archives

An interview
with Jan Ruml

Did anything change with regard to travelling to the West in the early nineties? Our country was more closed in this respect during the eighties than Poland or Hungary.

All I remember is that as soon as I was issued my first passport – after twenty years of not having one – I went to Austria. It was in 1989. I visited Germany and Italy next. That was in the early nineties. I did not need any visa to go there. It seems to me that the EU is making things more complicated nowadays.

So all you needed was your passport? Was a visa not required?

Yes, it's true. Of course, I still needed a visa to go to the US. I also had to have one when I went to two Latin American countries and Syria. Now we have the Schengen regime that has somewhat closed our border to foreigners – especially from Eastern European countries – probably for very logical reasons. Our visa policy is stricter now. The price of a visa for someone from Belarus is, for example, so steep that it makes travelling difficult or impossible, especially for young people. I think that such a policy is misguided. I do understand that the influx of people to the Czech Republic from other countries has to be limited. But such a policy deprives their young people of educational opportunities. I am in touch with some Belarusian non-governmental organisations. So when I look at the situation from the Belarusian perspective I see the need to lower the price of a visa. Thus, I would like to see some agreement being reached. With a view to this I contacted the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, asking them to do something about it. But my efforts were in vain. I encountered a very rigid attitude at the former. All they were willing to do was to grant some visa-fee reductions in individual cases, and that is not a good approach. On the other hand, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs wanted to solve this problem by way of student-exchange programmes and by making exceptions for students from Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine, but that would do little to help. I have the impression that we are closing ourselves as a country to the world. And I have a very negative feeling about that. Why should we do that when the world has opened up to us?

What did you feel when you went to the West for the first time?

I went to the West for the first time in 1989. I was 37. This first encounter with the West gave me a shock from which I have never really recovered, in a way. As soon as I crossed the border into Austria I got out of the car and started to stare at the incredible multitude and variety of goods. I had a coffee and felt by doing so that I was becoming free. I was tremendously moved. My next journey to the West took me to Paris. I went there as a journalist, to do an interview with someone but this interview never materialised. So, instead, I roamed the streets of Paris watching people, observing how they behaved, how they were dressed. I sat in a café smoking a cigarette and drinking absinthe. And it was an absolutely unique experience for me. Even today, twenty years later, when I go abroad, I have the feeling that I am entering a free country. And upon return I have this oppressive feeling in my stomach. So for me nothing has changed in that respect, even after all these years.

What did you expect of the West before your first journey there? And were your expectations matched by the reality?

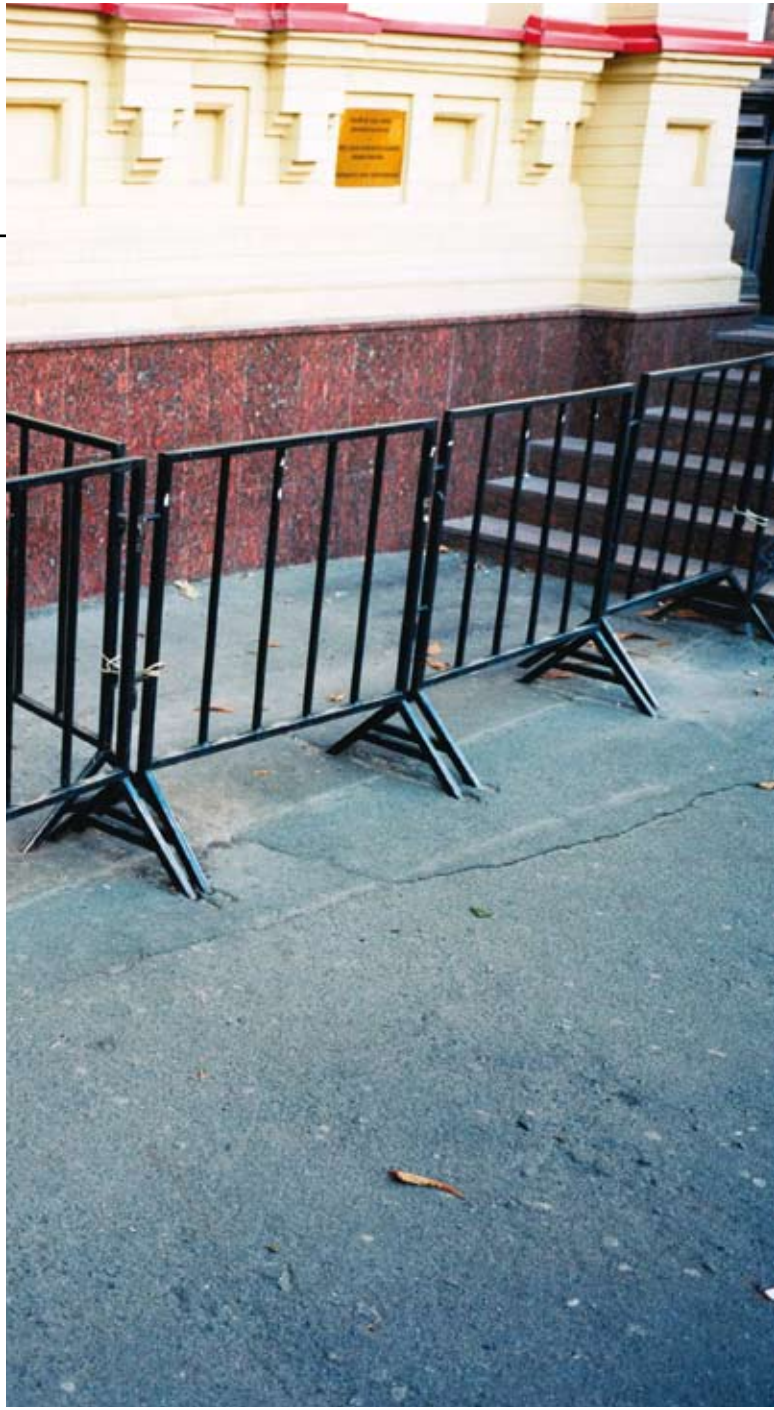
To put it simply, I was in shock. I was coming from a country surrounded by barbed wire, where everything was incredibly drab and seedy; particularly the Czechoslovak countryside. The difference seemed to me simply so irreconcilable. Though this difference is somehow less acute today, it seems to me that the Czechs are closing themselves from the outside world. There is this distrust among us of people who are different in some way, a form of xenophobia from the past that we seem unable to shake off. In contrast, wherever one travels in the world, one is struck by the openness and empathy people have for each other. It seems to me that we Czechs still carry some stifling fear within us. And that is the great difference. Naturally, when one goes abroad, one sees that other people have their problems too. Our situation twenty years ago was really nasty though.

How were your treated when you were crossing the borders?

Naturally the behaviour of our border guards and our customs officers was nothing to write home about. The same was true though of such services in other countries within the Soviet Block, like Hungary or Poland. The situation changed after November 1989, though the change was gradual. But whenever one was going abroad to work, the authorities still enjoyed giving one a hard time.

When was the visa regime for Czech citizens travelling to the EU lifted?

I believe it was lifted in the same year in which we applied for the EU membership, i.e. in 1995. Czech citizens still needed visas for some other countries though, such as the US. The US has lifted that obligation since then. This issue is, however, being much debated again now. On the other hand, Canada solved this visa problem without any sensitivity towards Czech citizens. I do hope that this will not lead to the introduction of some reciprocal measure. I understand that the situation in the US after 11 September 2001 necessitated the introduction of stricter security arrangements on their borders too, so as to eliminate risks relating to terrorism. But even excessive measures won't work because those who want to get in illegally will find some means of doing so. We live in an era of advanced technologies and yet we seem to have gone back to the situation of twenty years ago. ••



Inside the consulate of an EU Member State in Kyiv.
November 2008.

Inside the consulate of an EU Member State in Kyiv.
November 2008.

Natalya

from Ukraine

Natalya, 18. She lives in Kyiv. In her spare time she likes to read. This photograph was taken when she was applying for a visa to go to Poland to study. She found the whole procedure difficult. For her, the worst part of it was the need to collect all the necessary documents. According to her, there should not be a need to collect so many.

"It opened us to another world – never mind whether to a better one or not because the very contact with something different, an opportunity to compare is already quite precious."

Jerzy Szacki from Poland

About

was born in 1929 in Warsaw, Poland. He is considered to be one of the most outstanding sociologists in Poland. He specialises also in the history of ideas and in philosophy. He received his MA in Sociology from the University of Warsaw in 1952 where he was appointed Professor in 1973 and Full Professor in 1987. He is also well known in international scientific circles; he lectured at many foreign universities, including the University of Minnesota, the University of Oxford, and the Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen (Vienna). He worked and is working for many scientific institutions in Poland and abroad. He is the author of more than 470 works, including many books, articles, reviews, and translations. His most important works include "Counter-Revolutionary Paradoxes", "Encounters with Utopia", "Dilemmas of the History of Ideas and other Studies and Sketches", "Liberalism after Communism", and the "History of Sociological Thought".

photograph: Polish Sociological Association

An interview
with Jerzy Szacki

What notions did you have about the West before you went there?

When I went to France in 1959 I was already over thirty and my command of French was rather poor. But France was a country I knew quite well from books. I had got to know it in spite of the fact that I did not live there because I had spent my youth reading Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński's books and listening to French songs. I also used to read the French press from time to time. Therefore, leaving for France, I did not feel that I was going to a country that was completely foreign to me. Once there, I used to spend hours walking the streets of Paris, identifying and exploring places I knew well from books and films. It was easy. There were many such places because Paris was not that much different, as yet, from the one before the Second World War. It was only just starting to change and become prosperous. Generally, Paris was still quite neglected and quite poor. Suffice to say that most Parisian flats had no bathroom yet. Of course, the French were in a much better situation than we Poles, but the standard of living among members of the circles I used to frequent was not that much better than the one in Poland – the difference being though that Parisians still had a lot more possessions (furniture, books, etc.) that survived the war than we did. The main difference between them and us was that they lived in the city that had endured throughout the centuries and this endurance was completely natural to them. No, I did not suffer a shock. Generally, I knew what to expect when I went there.

Was it difficult for a young scientist to go abroad?

That used to vary. One had to have sufficient means and appropriate documents with all the necessary stamps. Somehow one always found the necessary means as there was no lack of various foreign institutions that for one reason or another considered it fit to finance our visits, internships, or lectures, participations in conferences or conventions, etc. I never had a problem with that. There were also perhaps some domestic resources to be used but as is known, they were scarce. I never tried to apply for them so I was never disappointed. Of course, the obtainment of these documents and these permits required some effort as one had to apply for a leave of absence, obtain permission from one's superiors, fill out appropriate forms, etc., after which one had to take all these to the International Cooperation Office (in my case it was the Warsaw University one) and then all one could do was to wait – for a good or bad result. The waiting time for a passport was not fixed. Sometimes I received it quickly and at other times the waiting was considerably drawn out. Sometimes one got a passport when a conference or a meeting one was to attend was already over. Because of such problems I was able to explore Rome in 1981 instead of going to France but as I was given a passport too late I decided to use it anyway – not quite legally though – to travel to another country. I had quite an unpleasant experience when in 1982 I was invited to lecture at the College de France. I initiated the appropriate requests many months in advance but I was still waiting for a passport. Time went by and I still had no document. The date for the lectures was approaching. I used to make a phone call every day – no longer to the University but to the Passport Office. I was being endlessly put off. In the end I got a passport in the afternoon of the day before the day of the first lecture and I had to get a French visa from the Embassy only after it was closed. I was handed this visa in the Ambassador's private residence and somehow I managed [to get to Paris on time]. Travelling was, therefore, not easy – sometimes one had problems; one wasted time and lost one's temper.

Travels to the West afforded one also an opportunity to see the world of democracy and of the free market economy, didn't they?

Yes, it's true. All those living in the Soviet Block were learning about democracy in the West, and from the West. That was natural. After all, democracy originated there. Admittedly, one could learn a great deal too, staying in Poland and making use of the opportunities afforded here. One simply had to read not only that which had been approved by the censors. In a large city with a university it was not impossible. Anyway, one was somehow always able to access "Kultura" published in Paris.

Since the fifties I used to read fairly regularly "Le Monde", and from time to time the "New York Times" and other publications – and above all, various books published in the West.

Did the West "on paper" as it were – the one glimpsed from books and newspapers – resemble the real one?

Yes and no. The theoretical knowledge is usually full of generalities that one has to correct through direct observation as time and time again one has to realise how much more complex and rich the reality is. So what, if for example, one knew the general rules of democracy if one did not have a chance to observe how democracy was functioning on a day-to-day basis? Therefore, my first longer stay in the US was for me an eye-opening experience, even though it was in the rather provincial Mid-West where I saw how little one need be concerned with all the goings on in Washington and with what the Federal Government was doing. When people had a problem no one thought it fit to go the capital or even write a petition to a Governor but instead people visited their neighbours and together looked for a way to solve this problem on their own, without any pompous speeches about democracy. This for me was the discovery of democracy. I don't, of course, claim that this applies to the entire US or that this is how it is done in "my" Minnesota even today but such experiences are extremely important. They are not always positive. Equally numerous were disappointments involving the realisation of how many of my notions about Western democracy were the result of my idealising and the naive expectation that lifting formal restrictions would immediately change everything for the better.

When applying for a visa did you have to wait in a queue outside a foreign embassy or consulate?

I never had to wait in a queue for two reasons: visa arrangements were for the University to make and in the exceptional circumstances waiting in a queue would be of no help, anyway. In such situations one had to look for someone with connections. For example, I no longer remember who caused it that the aforementioned visa for France was given to me in an irregular manner – "after hours". Generally, in such circumstances, an acquaintance was indispensable and one would find someone like that – usually, just in time. My situation was not, perhaps, completely atypical.

Did the red tape (present not only in Poland but also in the West) make travelling very difficult for you?

I had some amusing experiences. During one of my longer stays in France, I had to extend my residence permit by a few days so I went to a Police station. I waited my turn in a queue, and I was given a long form to fill out. The form was difficult to fill out because it required remembering some genealogical details which usually one was not required to give and I had to simply invent them hoping that nobody would check their veracity later. These are trifles, though. And as for the bureaucratic formalities, I think that there is nothing wrong with them because they make us stick to the rules. The only point is though that, first, these rules should not be ridiculous, secondly, they should be binding on citizens and officials alike, and thirdly, citizens should have an opportunity to acquaint themselves with them.

Did you have to scheme, to beat the system, to travel?

I don't think I ever had to rely on a fictitious Letter of Invitation from a private individual. I had letters of invitation that were as official as they could possibly be as they were issued by various institutions the respectability of which nobody would dare to call into question. Such a letter was, as it were, a guaranteed solution for visa problems that those intending to travel, for example, to the US often had to contend with. Furthermore, it used to even free one from the need to wait in a queue. Back in the days of communist Poland, the big problem was with a passport that one could not – unlike today – keep normally at home. And further, one could never be sure whether one would get it again, and if so, when that would happen. Thus, once you left Poland on a longer scholarship you would not be that eager to come back too soon even if otherwise you could afford to do so. For example, it was not that far from Vienna to Warsaw. Yet I preferred not to indulge in such trips so as to save myself from having to seek permission to leave Poland again, which, as I knew, was sometimes refused. Anyway, there was no guarantee that permission already given would stay valid throughout the period it was formally to cover. From that point of view, the change that took place in 1989 was dramatic – maybe even more than when the borders were opened following the accession of Poland to the European Union.

What was crossing the border like; did you have any bad experiences with border checks?

Crossing the border was not always easy for me. I have had two not particularly pleasant conversations: one in the UK and one in the US. Nothing special, mind you! I was simply asked about matters of a personal nature. Questions of that kind should never have been posed at the time of crossing a border. The biggest stumbling block I encountered during my foreign travels though was economic in nature. To put it simply, I had no money.

Did you feel a bit like a second-class citizen abroad?

Yes, I did – to some degree. Of course I managed sometimes to surprise someone that I was from Poland and yet I knew something. I remember one lady in the US who wanted to show me the most beautiful films she had ever seen. She showed me the "Black Orpheus" being convinced that she was giving me a very special initiation. I disappointed her deeply because I knew both the film and the name of its director and I even remembered a few scenes. Amusing missionary attempts were also made by some Americans trying to convince me, for example, that Communism was no good. However, I very quickly accepted the fact that in general the World was not that interested in Poland, and that knowledge about Poland was rather poor. It's a pity but that's life. Our knowledge about other countries in Poland is, after all, also quite limited.

What significance did foreign travels have for a young scientist?

It opened us to another world – never mind whether to a better one or not because the very contact with something different, an opportunity to compare is already quite precious. There were also legends about material benefits one could derive from a foreign trip. There was not that much truth to them because even if there was some, it applied only during some periods in the history of communist Poland, and even then, only to some scholarships – they were not all equally lucrative. I remember my first stay in France as a year of poverty. The scholarship I was receiving from a school that was well known for helping Poles was enough to get by on but on a very modest level, especially if one wanted to go every day to the cinema, and sometimes to the theatre as, after all, it was difficult not to want to

do that being abroad where seemingly one had an opportunity to catch up. I remember whole long months when I would eat only baguettes and the cheapest sardines, washed down with tap water. At other times scholarships were more generous and one could even afford to buy something for oneself provided that one was quite frugal which I was not capable of being. I preferred to see this or that instead of saving dollars that were ever so precious then. Money would disappear anyway and that which one managed to see would stay etched in one's memory forever. But scientific trips are not only about the joy of observing the world, of exploring other cultures, of seeing works of art, etc. They are also about learning one's profession, and quite often, they are a prerequisite for performing it well, and that at home used to be and still is, sometimes, extremely difficult or even impossible to do. This applies not only to these, ever increasing in number, fields of knowledge that require extremely expensive equipment. Even a humanist does not have it that easy in Poland if he or she wants to acquaint himself or herself with all the more important publications on a given subject he or she is interested in. And there is no shortage of such subjects that are extremely difficult to deal with because in Poland one simply cannot find basic materials. Though, for some time, the day has been saved by the Internet that affords one, for example, access to hundreds of scientific publications without having to leave home, or to on-line bookstores through which one can get the most needed items within a reasonable time, but even that does not solve the problem. Finding oneself in a well-stocked library affords one completely different opportunities. However, there are no such libraries in Poland and we will never have them here.

Would your scientific career have developed the way it did if you had not travelled?

Of course, it wouldn't have. And besides, when one is in Poland, one has to participate in dozens of gatherings, meetings, the phone rings, letters arrive, and so on, and so forth. A trip is an excellent way to get away from the cares of daily life. In those days, when I started to travel, "getting away" could have been construed literally: there was no Internet and no SMS or e-mail. Making a phone call was an incredibly serious operation. When, during the sixties, I wanted whilst in Paris to call my family in Poland I had to go to a post office, situated quite a long way away from my apartment. I had to order a call and

wait several hours to be connected. One was isolated, cut off from all the news. Foreign trips facilitated also taking care of one's mental health: I felt better when I didn't have to read Polish newspapers for a few months. I was simply a different man. Today, I no longer take longer trips but I notice that even one week away does one a lot of good since it helps to regain a sense of proportion. The very same news that today excite us so much, become often unimportant or simply unnoticeable after only a few days.

Did the friendships established in those days help you in your scientific career?

Some friendships established then still remain. Some I renewed after many years, but anyway, I did not establish many relationships that endured. I could name a few individuals but not many of them are still alive. Some of them influenced the choices I've made in my professional life. Generally, I used to establish contacts that were quite casual. Such contacts develop into a friendship only in exceptional circumstances. One needs to have a personality of a certain kind to do that and I do not have it. I am not that sociable. Nor am I the sort of person to maintain contacts.

Poland started to open towards the West in 1989 and acceded to the Schengen agreement in 2007. Do you find that travelling is much easier now?

In the light of what I've said it looks as though I have never had any serious problems with travelling. There is, however, a major difference between the situation we are in today – when I have a passport at home and can use it anytime I want to – and the situation where before each trip I had to submit an application and wait few months, uncertain whether I would get a passport. It is unlikely that I will have to experience again the situation I found myself in just before my first trip to the US: a day before my departure – when I already had a passport and my luggage was packed – some gentlemen from the Polish Ministry of Interior showed up and took me to the police station where I was warned that I may be approached while abroad by foreign intelligence services and that I should therefore exercise caution. I promised to do that and I kept my word. No agent approached me anyway.

Unfortunately, Ukraine and Belarus are today worse off than Poland was in those days. Because at least Poland had had two good periods during which the West was fascinated with Poland: one just after the October 1956 events and the other, at the time of the Solidarity movement. Unfortunately, Europe has no such fascination for Ukraine or Belarus today. ••

Applying for a visa entails the need to present a vast number of documents.

In Maksim's apartment in Kyiv.
November 2008.

Maksim

from Ukraine

Maksim, 31. He is a journalist and civic activist from Kyiv. He also takes photographs and works for organisations helping refugees. In his spare time he likes to read and listen to music. He has already visited many EU Member States, including Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, France, Italy, Belgium, and Sweden. When we spoke with him he was planning to attend a conference in Stockholm. Even though he had no difficulties with obtaining a visa, he criticised the whole process, including the need to provide numerous documents, the lengthy queues, and the long wait for a final decision. He told us that the various consulates were not consistent in their requirements as they requested of him documents of diverse types, such as a Letter of Invitation, proof of employment, or a remuneration statement. He feels that the whole procedure should be shortened and consular officers be required to state the reasons for refusals.

"Upon our return we were stripped of that dream of travelling to Rome by harsh reality when our Husák said that the 'border crossings are not going to resemble a promenade', and thus placed us inside a 'normalisation' cage."

Soňa Szomolányi from Slovakia

About

was born in 1946 in Tatranská Lomnica (then Czechoslovakia, and now Slovakia). She is Professor of Political Science at Comenius University in Bratislava. Until recently she was the Head of its Political Science Department (from 1996 to 2007). Her main areas of interest are democratisation and political elites. She published widely on Slovakia's transition to democracy as compared to that of other Central and Eastern European countries. She is the author of, amongst others, "The Crooked Path of Slovakia towards Democracy" and the co-author of "Spain and Slovakia – Two Paths towards Democracy". Currently, she is the national coordinator of a unique comparative research project being carried out in 18 countries "Integrated and United: A Quest for Citizenship in an Ever Closer Europe".

photograph: private archives

An interview
with Soňa Szomolányi

When did you go abroad the first time?

I am from the Tatras region that is near the border with Poland. Thus my first travels abroad led me to Poland. As an inhabitant of the border area I was able to cross to the Polish side, visit places like Nowy Targ or Zakopane, with only my ID. Then other trips followed. Crossing a border was very stressful during the Cold War. One was afraid. Even when I used to visit Poland I had to buy Polish currency on the black market in order to buy some consumer goods there. For example, since I used to ski a lot I bought skiing equipment in Poland because it was cheaper there. Then I had to smuggle it into my country. Thus, my first experiences of the border crossing were related to the checks, and to fear.

The first time I went to the West was in 1967 – to study sociology. I earned some money picking strawberries in Eastern England. My grandmother, who lived in America once upon a time, gave me five dollars for my trip. When I wanted to exchange this money in a bank in a small town, the bank clerk was so amazed that the dollar bill I handed him was from the twenties that he decided to verify its authenticity. I returned to England in 1968 as a member of a student group so I was there when the Warsaw Pact armies invaded Czechoslovakia. I had a one-year scholarship at a university in London. The solidarity and help we Czechs and Slovaks received from the ordinary British people and even from their government were astonishing. Some older people felt that it was their moral obligation to compensate us for what the British politicians had done in Munich in 1938.

After a while we faced a dilemma whether to return to Czechoslovakia or stay permanently abroad. I had no idea how much everything had changed at home after the invasion. I longed to see the Tatras though. Emigrating meant that perhaps I would not be able to visit my homeland for a long time. So I returned to Czechoslovakia, and then could not travel abroad for a long time.

We decided to return to Czechoslovakia hitchhiking across Europe. In Venice we though that it was high time we got back home but for Easter we would go to Rome. Upon our return we were stripped of that dream of travelling to Rome by harsh reality when our Husák said that the "border crossings are not going to resemble a promenade", and thus placed us inside a "normalisation" cage. So I finished studying sociology in Slovakia and stayed there at the University to teach.

Unlike my colleagues, who used to arrange for themselves documents enabling them to spend a summer holiday, at least, in Yugoslavia, I refused to subject myself to bureaucratic tortures or instead, to seek contacts to secure the necessary documents. But I could not refuse when in 1981 my sister decided to spend her holiday in Western Europe. However, it would have been impossible without connections. My mother's admirer from her youth worked as a bank director at that time. So I went to see him and upon arrival passed on greetings from my mother. Thanks to his help we were able to travel for three weeks in an old beat-up Škoda across Europe. Before departure, we bought some Western currencies on the black market. We were afraid of smuggling them out of the country so my uncle advised us to put them in an empty meat tin and then fill it up with sand, which we did. We were quite terrified at the border but although we were subjected to a thorough check they did not find the money.

What was the attitude of border guards and customs officers toward you like?

I was afraid only on the Czechoslovak side. When we crossed to the Austrian side I burst into tears because I had to release the tension and stress I had experienced just a few minutes earlier. Soon we stopped, on the outskirts of Vienna, and opened the tin to get the money out. And then we travelled free for three weeks, across France and Switzerland. I remember our amazement at the fact that when we were crossing from Belgium to the Netherlands, there was nobody at the border crossing to check our passports. But we did need exit stamps in them.

What do you think was the biggest benefit that you derived from your travels to the West?

First of all, it was the experience of freedom and the possibility to meet the reality of a world that was different, more civilised.

Did these travels influence your life?

They did – definitely! My main personality traits were formed, especially, when I was studying in Great Britain, around 1968. My generation of sixty-year olds now was formed around the ideals and values of 1968. It was this generation that was behind the profound changes in 1989. Currently, the power elites in Slovakia are made up, mostly, of individuals who are younger, who grew up during the so-called "normalisation" period, when what prevailed was the hypocrisy, corruption, duplicity, and moral decay of the declining communist regime.

Who gained more from the opening of the borders, Slovaks or Austrians?

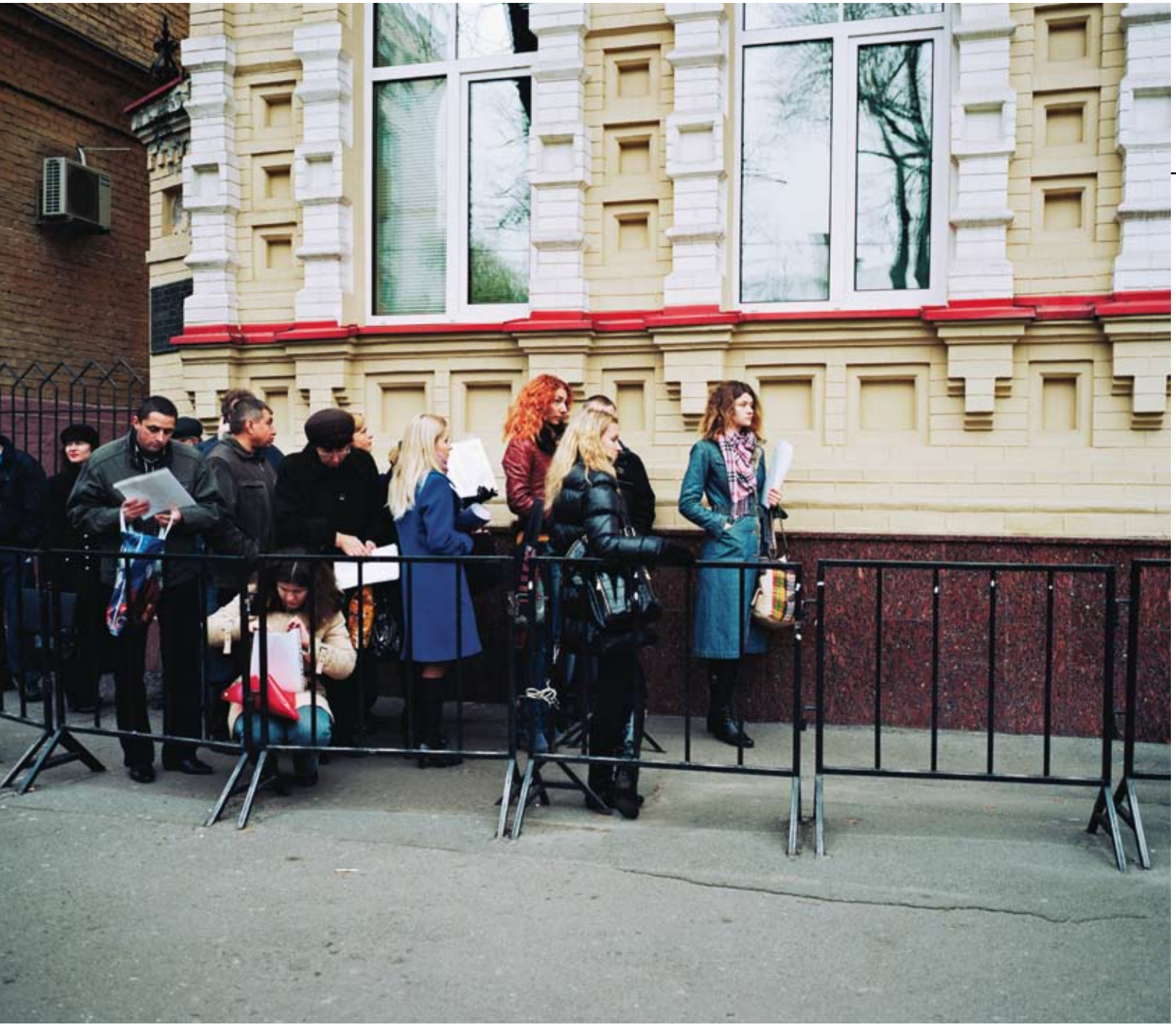
Definitely we gained more. Martin Bútora wrote a script for an International Human Rights Day on 10 December 1989. In it he suggested that the borders be opened and the Slovaks walk freely to Hainburg on that day. His project was called "Hello Europe!" We did not believe that we would be able to organise this march at all. But in the end more than 100,000 people showed up. We walked unhindered right through the border crossing at Berg, where armed men used to stand guard. It was an incredible experience even for the Austrians living there. They were opening their windows and offering us tea. We walked in peace. It was an euphoric experience. We walked to the banks of the River Danube. The Czechoslovak flag fluttered in the wind above Devin Castle. Some artists made a huge heart from barbed wire and my daughter, who had just graduated from her school, took a piece of it as a keepsake.

These days I live only 10 minutes away on foot from the Austrian border. I still keep reminding myself how amazing it is to be able to cross into Austria without a passport. First, the visa-regime was lifted. Then we did not need our passports either. And now, we do not even need to exchange money. At the same time, the mental barriers still persist. I live closer to Berg, on the Austrian side, than to Devin, on the Slovak one. But I started to take

walks in the hills near Berg only two years ago. Today these walks are a part of my routine but it took me a long time to get used to that freedom. This example shows that mental barriers can persist even for someone as cosmopolitan as I am. Today, I can imagine something that used to be completely unimaginable for me back then: all the signs of the barbed-wire border between Slovakia and Austria will disappear in ten years time, without a trace, and nearby Austrian villages will become the suburbs of Bratislava.

Don't you find that our accession to the Schengen Agreement markedly complicated matters for citizens of third countries wishing to travel to Slovakia?

The Slovaks need time to get accustomed to their newfound freedom and prosperity before they will start to think about the needs of their less fortunate neighbours. This is the reason for tightening the borders. Like the Austrians in the past, we are the easternmost EU Member State now. It involves performing the duties assigned to us by the EU. Of course, it is important not to create a new Iron Curtain on the EU eastern border. That depends, though, on the other side too. ••



Queuing is a constant element of the visa-application process.
November 2008.

Maya in Moldova.
November 2008.

Maya

from Moldova

Maya, 21. She is from Mereni, a village in the Anenii district of East Moldova. She works there as a nurse. She wants to visit her friends in the Czech Republic. She applied for a visa and was successful. However, she found the entire procedure to be too complex and too costly. She complained mostly about the difficulties of getting an appointment to submit the necessary documents. She had to present both originals and copies of documents relating to her education, employment, health insurance, criminal record, etc.

"One has to be able to see both the benefits and the shortcomings… But you have to see them with your own eyes."

Petruška Šustrová
from the Czech Republic

About

was born in 1947, in Prague (then Czechoslovakia, now the Czech Republic). She was admitted to Charles University in Prague in 1966 where she studied Czech language and history. She did not complete her studies though because she was expelled for political reasons. In 1969 she was arrested, tried, and sentenced to two years in prison, for her supposed subversive activity. After her release, she worked as a postal clerk and a cleaning lady. In December 1976 she signed Charter 77. In 1979, she became a member of the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Persecuted (VONS). In 1985 she became a spokesperson for the Charter 77 signatories. Then from August 1982 until November 1989 she could not find work because of her openly critical stance of the regime. Immediately after the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia she started to work for the independent press, including "Respekt" weekly. In May 1990, she was appointed Advisor to the Interior Minister of Czechoslovakia. Soon she became the Deputy Minister of Interior. She held this post until 1992. Currently, she works as a journalist, especially for "Lidové Noviny" daily, and as a translator (mainly from English and Polish).

photograph: Přemysl Fialka

An interview
with Petruška Šustrová

What were the obstacles faced by those who wanted to travel abroad prior to 1989, whether to the West, or simply to Yugoslavia?

I suppose it depends on whom you have in mind. The minority of us, to which I belonged, faced no obstacles whatsoever because we had no chance of getting a passport. Thus, we could not travel at all. Apart from a passport one needed the so-called exit permit. Plus there was something called a foreign currency certificate for which you had to approach a bank that would be willing to sell you some foreign currency. To do that you needed – as far as I know – approval from your workplace, the Revolutionary Trade Union Movement, or your local Communist Party organisation. But in my case, none of this was an option. It was easier to travel to a Soviet Bloc country. Yugoslavia was considered to be in between.

The borders were opened though after 1989. Do you remember your first trip to the West? What did you feel?

Paradoxically, firstly I didn't go to the West, but to the East. I had a friend in Paris for many years. Her name was Mrs. Tigrid. She tried to persuade me to apply for a passport and visit her in Paris. I explained to her that this was impossible. But then in 1988, she persuaded me to at least persuade my husband. So he applied for a passport and got one. He applied for a visa and an exit permit too, and when he collected all this, he left for Paris. So, in the end, I also applied for a passport. It was in early 1989. And a month later I was given one, without a problem. Thus I was able to go to Budapest in June 1989 to meet my sister, whom I had not seen since 1968. I also met a number of Czechoslovak émigrés there, whom I thought I would never see again.

Next, I also applied for an exit permit, as I wanted to attend an émigré meeting in Franken that was organised by Opus Bonum. Naturally, I was not granted the permit, but my passport was not cancelled either. So, at the beginning of November 1989 I was able to go to Wrocław – also without any problems.

Finally, the borders opened and I decided to visit Mrs. Tigrid in Paris. First, I met my mother in Munich, who had also left the country in 1968. I flew to Paris next. I had to take a plane instead of going overland because I lacked a transit visa for Germany as I had no time to apply for it. Later, this visa-regime was lifted. With time we were able to learn something that was normal for people in the West, i.e. that if you need a visa you visited a relevant consulate where you easily received an appropriate stamp.

Going back to before 1989, you said that your husband was able to go to the West. It seems though that the main problem was not with visas but with the obtainment of documents from the Czechoslovak side. Is this so?

I can't give you an answer to that because being dissidents we were not considered to be regular folk. As far as I know though, there never were problems with visas. The problems were always with the Czechoslovak authorities. We dissidents did not have problems with foreign authorities because they did not suspect us of wanting to go there to earn some money working illegally. If they were afraid of us at all, it was that we might decide to apply for political asylum. But I am sure that not many of us applied for a tourist, or a transit visa to later do that.

When I interviewed Jan Ruml, he described his first trip abroad, to Austria, as something he would never forget. What are your memories of your first travel abroad?

The first time I went abroad was to Munich and my impressions of that journey amounted to nothing much because I had a fever and thus had to spend the three days I was there in bed. Then, it was time to catch a train back home and that was that. On the other hand, visiting Paris – where I went in January of that year – was a tremendous experience. I remember to this day Mrs. Tigrid taking me to a small hotel where she used to put up her acquaintances and friends. The hotel was charming. The next day I got up at seven in the morning. I had no idea that almost everyone in the West was in bed at that hour. I took a street-

map and set out to see Paris. I was struck by how many street-sweepers were there, cleaning the streets, and shopkeepers washing sidewalks in front of their shops. I was amazed. And probably felt much like my husband who had returned earlier from Paris, absolutely bedazzled. We thought we would need at least twenty years to catch up with the West. But they would move forward during these twenty years too so this gap would never disappear. As for shops, we have probably caught up with in the West in this respect. I am afraid though that, as far as what is known as political culture, or the culture of coexistence, we have already missed our chance to improve.

You said that after 1989, you only had problems with visas when you wanted to go to the East. Today, the Czech Republic is a party to the Schengen Agreement. Critics of the Schengen regime say that it creates a new Iron Curtain on the EU border with the East because it restricts the movement of ordinary people. Advocates of this regime claim though that their movements need to be regulated. What do you think about that?

I will start with the Schengen area. My friends get out of their cars at every ex-border-crossing within the Schengen area and bow down. I do that too, because the disappearance of these borders is simply a miracle. As for the visa requirement introduced by the Czech Republic towards citizens of several East European countries after 2000, I regard this to be a crime. This requirement is justified as a measure to prevent the spread of a criminal element from these countries. This is a lie because organised crime can always find a way. Nor is it possible to prevent the entry of those who want to work here illegally because these people are enslaved by other mafia-like organisations, modern-day slave-owners that can always procure visas for them. The greater freedom of movement would benefit everyone involved, not least because our country is a "poor cousin" of its Western brethren. The Western countries should welcome this too because they need an efficient supply of workers. Those from the East European countries concerned are willing to take jobs which West Europeans, and even Czechs, are no longer willing to do. Thus, to leave them at the mercy of some criminals is perfidious. The only purpose this visa-regime serves nowadays is to prevent or restrict contacts between people who want to meet for legitimate reasons, such as journalists, activists from non-governmental organisations, etc. And that is ridiculous because, among other things, such contacts stimulate the economy. We, in turn, would have the opportunity to learn more about how things are elsewhere. Instead, as it is now, the EU and other organisations are sending the message that we are superior to others, which in my opinion is abominable.

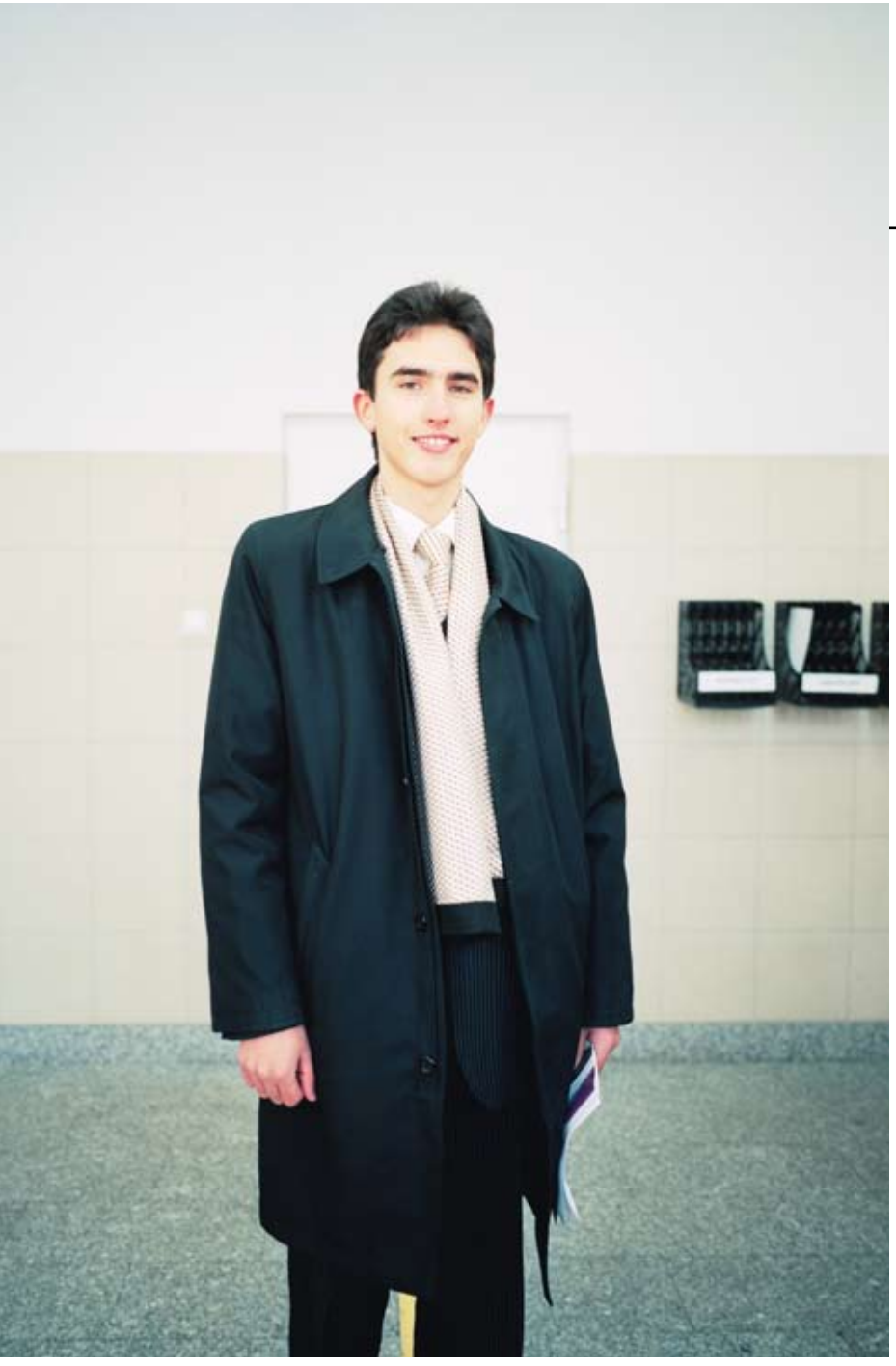
In conclusion, I would like to ask you another, and perhaps banal, question: If you could arrange things differently, what would be the main advantages of your solution?

For Westerners or those who were living in the so-called "free world" prior to 1989 my answer would probably sound banal. Freedom is one of the most precious values. And one's willingness to observe the rules, such as to cross the street only when the light is green stems from, among other things, the feeling of being free and equal. This may be hard to explain to someone who has never had the experience of enjoying equal rights. One has to remember that most of the citizens of East European countries and countries of the former USSR were not free until the fall of communism. That includes even those who worked for the state security because even they were not allowed to travel freely. The fact is that you can travel wherever and whenever you want, meet who you want, etc.... Freedom is like air. You became aware of it only once you lose it.

The more one learns the more one is capable of making comparisons, and of finding that in other countries there are problems too; and that your own problems are a little more trivial, by comparison. To become too engrossed in the problems in your own country is dangerous because you may get the idea that this is the worst place on earth.

One has to be able to see both the benefits and the shortcomings... But you have to see them with your own eyes in order to realise that what we regard as a basic standard of living would be considered luxury in other parts of the world. ••

Inside the consulate of an EU Member State in Kyiv.
November 2008.



Inside the consulate of an EU Member State in Kyiv.
November 2008.

Olexandr

from Ukraine

Olexandr, 18. He lives and studies law in Kyiv. He sings in a church choir and likes to play basketball in his spare time. This photo was taken when he was waiting for a visa to go to Poland. It will be his first trip to the EU. He feels that the visa-application procedure should be made much shorter.

"I get shivers even today, whenever and wherever I witness such a situation [border control]."

Magda Vášáryová from Slovakia

About

was born in 1948 in Banská Štiavnica (then Czechoslovakia, and now Slovakia). She is a graduate of Comenius University, Sociology Department, in Bratislava. She worked as an actress for several Slovak theatres, including the Slovak National Theatre. She appeared in numerous films too. She was a founder and the first Director of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association. She held the posts of the Ambassador of Czechoslovakia to Austria (from 1989 to 1992) and of Slovakia to Poland (from 2000 to 2005). She was State Secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic. Currently, she is Member of the National Council of the Slovak Republic.

photograph: private archives

An interview
with Magda Vašáryová

Can you tell us something about your travels abroad prior to 1989? Did you ever want to emigrate?

Yes, I did, several times. I was close to emigrating in 1968. A film studio in Rome was even making the necessary arrangements for us in Italy back then. Unfortunately, my parents could not get a passport, because of something my uncle did. He was studying at the Sorbonne and refused to come back to Czechoslovakia when he was ordered to do so after the events of 1948, with others like him. He was prosecuted in absentia. So I knew that if I were to flee to the West without my parents they would have problems and I would not be able to see them again. Such situations were quite common in Czechoslovakia. Children were not allowed to travel even to attend their parent's funeral. I chose not to emigrate in the end because I wanted to stay close to my parents.

I became very sick when I was 12 so the doctors recommended a stay by the sea. Therefore, we were to go to Bulgaria but on the eve of our departure someone sent two telegrams to the authorities informing them that our trip would be contrary to the interests of Czechoslovakia. Thus, we were not allowed to go. It was then that I, a girl from a small Slovak town, realised that there were borders between countries and they were closed to me. We heard later that it was one of my teachers who was responsible for the ban on our trip. She claimed in her letters to the authorities that my uncle would meet us in Bulgaria and take me away with him to the West. I used to greet her politely, whenever we met until the day she died. I still don't know what possessed her to write such absurdities, or whether she was paid for doing so.

I grew up in a family which used to hide forbidden books under coal. I was always prone to reading foreign newspapers. Thus, I quickly learned a few foreign languages. I learned Serbo-Croatian because Yugoslavia was more liberal than Czechoslovakia back then. This gave me an opportunity to read books in a language that was banned in my country. When I visited Yugoslavia my friends were swimming in the sea and I was reading books – from Pasternak to Gombrowicz. I was not interested in shopping there at all. I wanted to find out what freedom of speech and free access to information meant in practice. Even Poland was more open than Czechoslovakia during the seventies. So I learned Polish too. I used to frequent the Polish Institute and read Polish newspapers.

I nearly went abroad towards the end of the sixties but did not. Then, my passport was revoked in 1973 and I was unable to get it back until the beginning of the eighties. I resigned myself then to the idea that I would not be able to travel at all, until the end of my life. And then a miracle occurred. I was suddenly able to go to the US in connection with the film, "Sophie´s Choice". After an hour of interrogation by an Immigration Officer at one of the New York airports, I knew what it was like to be a second-class person from a second-class country. I get shivers even today, whenever and wherever I witness such a situation. Therefore, I really appreciate the Schengen Zone. Immigration Officers no longer have power over me. People of my generation, people like me, never stop wondering at this miracle: that we are living in a Europe without internal frontiers now.

I remember the debates whether to the Schengen Zone ought to be created or not. There were many who were opposed – as always in European politics. And such opposition still remains. Recently, Austrian newspapers reported that the majority of Austrians would like to see the border with Slovakia re-established.

Was this attitude prevalent in Austria even during the nineties, when the borders between the East and the West opened?

Yes, it was. When I was the Czechoslovakian Ambassador to Austria, all the Austrian villages along the border with Czechoslovakia held referenda about whether to reopen or rebuild the roads, lines, and bridges that had been closed or destroyed during the Cold War. It was in June 1990. The overwhelming majority said "No". The so-called "Swiss factor" played an important role here. Generally, people want to hold on to that which they

already know, which they are used to, and reject a priori everything unknown, or new to them. For example, once they get used to the neighbours living on the other side of barbed wire they are afraid to see that changed. The Swiss factor may be particularly dangerous if the policy followed is based on hatred towards neighbours.

Currently, Austria is the fourth wealthiest Member State of the EU. That would not be so if Europe had remained divided as it was during the Cold War. Thus it surprises me that even today one can build one's political capital around the fear of foreigners – note, for example, Jörg Haider`s success and the growing popularity of his followers. Such sentiments are not common only to Austrians though.

Slovakia is still a somewhat closed country too. One can easily see that in the decidedly small number of Slovak citizenships granted to foreigners. Thousands may soon knock on our doors but I am afraid that our citizens would not be able to get accustomed to a life with people who were born abroad. I still consider our accession to the EU in 2004 a miracle though. It has been a huge success. We had been dreaming of something like that for generations. Now, we have a responsibility towards those who remain outside the EU, like citizens of the Western Balkan states, or of Ukraine.

Do you find some similarities between the attitude Slovakia has taken towards Ukraine and Austria has taken towards Slovakia since 1989?

I am disappointed that currently our foreign policy – or whatever remains of it after 2006 – is again characterised by a rough stance towards our Eastern neighbour. Slovak foreign policy is once again informed by the seeming importance of Russia. It appears that we are repeating the mistake Vladimir Mečiar [the Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic between 1994 and 1998] made, stressing the importance of Russia because of its geographic proximity to our territory. If we create a new Iron Curtain or "wall" between Slovakia and Ukraine, we will forfeit the development of Eastern Slovakia. This could somewhat resemble the situation a part of Austria behind the Morava River was in for 40 years during the Cold War. This area used to be called "Toten Winckel" – a blind spot. The road and railway system were not up to par so there were no conditions for trade.

The situation was becoming worse and worse, and people on both sides stopped trusting each other. They stopped meeting each other, helping one another, and became distrustful of each other. I think that we have to do our best – in cooperation with Hungary and Poland – to ensure that the border with Ukraine will became as open as possible. Today, it is hard to imagine Ukraine becoming another EU Member State. But that does not mean that we must spare ourselves building close and friendly relations between us. Friendship and trust among the countries could be easily built by the adoption of a liberal visa policy or other similar measures. If a country wants to prosper it has to offer its inhabitants hope and encourage the youth to stay. It has to create a suitable environment at home, as well as build and maintain appropriate relations with its neighbours.

Going back to your own travels, what were your first impressions of the West? What are your memories of your first visit there?

I went to Belgrade, first. I was fourteen then. For us Czechs or Slovaks, Yugoslavia was in the West back then. I was amazed at the availability of foreign products there. Shops were offering various goods that are the norm for us nowadays, such as Coca-Cola, Nescafe, etc. But I had my first encounter with the "true" West only when I went to Austria in 1968. I had been able to watch Austrian television programmes at home before that so I knew a bit about what to expect.

So you had a chance to observe Western democracy at work, so to speak. Were you aware of the difference between the two systems of the economy and law?

I used to watch Hohes Haus, the news programme of ORF television, reporting on goings-on in the Austrian Parliament. I think that I had quite a realistic worldview. Therefore, I never bought into the propaganda about how fantastic our communist society was. The difference between them and us was visible to me at first sight. People in the West walked holding themselves straight, talked with self-confidence, and were open. I believe that we – in the East – still have a lot to learn to become that self-confident and that free in expressing our opinions. I think that the fear we lived under in the days of autocratic regimes is still deeply embedded in us. ••

Inside the consulate of an EU Member State in Kyiv.
November 2008.

Outside the consulate of an EU Member State in Kyiv.
November 2008

Anna

from Ukraine

Anna, 27. She works as a manager. Her hobby is photography. She is shown here waiting in a queue at one of the EU consulates in Kyiv. She applied for a visa to go on holiday. She has already visited some EU Member States, including Germany, Italy, and the Czech Republic. She feels that the visa application procedure is too burdensome and complex. The number of documents required is excessive, too.

Stefan Batory Foundation

The Stefan Batory Foundation advocates the liberalisation of the visa policies followed by Poland and other EU Member States vis-à-vis citizens of East European countries. It does so, in particular, via its "Friendly EU Border" project launched in 2002. To find out more about this programme, please visit our **www.batory.org.pl ••**

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This publication consists of two parts: "THEN" and "NOW". In the part "THEN" through the interviews with 15 individuals from the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia we show what it was like for people from those countries to travel to Western Europe before 1989 or just after, and what the significance of those travels was at that time. The part "NOW" is devoted to the problems with travelling to the EU encountered by inhabitants of Eastern Europe today. We show portraits of individuals from Moldova and Ukraine who were applying for a visa to go to an EU Member State last year. The aim of this publication is to show that Europe's division is both the problem of the past and of the present.

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