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Confessions of a Migrant (A Real Folk Tale)

Life is a great adventure. I have always known this. Moving and travelling is a much larger adventure within it. As a matter of fact, the greatest adventurers were always travellers. And a migrant is a traveller – that is: an adventurer. And similar to the heroes of Hungarian folk tales, he has to tackle several tasks in order to gain the hand of the old king's daughter and half of the kingdom. In my case, the reward is a little smaller in a certain sense, although it is not to be underestimated: it is a paper that enables him to reside in the new place. If you have a paper, everything is all right. Not all gates open before you, but at least, they are not slammed shut before you.

During the journey several monsters must be fought. True, dragons, evil witches or ugly croaks camouflaging themselves as beautiful girls exist only in fairy tales and are today replaced by officials. The bureaucrats. But not in the sense that Max Weber wrote about (or dreamt about) them. Namely, the opponent is the bureaucrat who strictly abides the rules of law. The bureaucrats of the Hungarian immigration authority are similar to Weber's conception of them to the extent that they are making headway in the official hierarchy, but based on our own experience, one can hardly affirm that they are calculating. However, it is not sure at all that bureaucrats are responsible for their responses because even they probably do not find their way through the forest of constantly changing law and decrees, as I will soon exemplify. Furthermore, I would rather say that the majority of bureaucrats were kind and helpful.

And speaking about tales: in migration stories we very rarely meet characters who help the protagonist (the migrant) and are, thus, also positive heroes. On the other hand, there are too many negative characters; no fairy tale could bear it. If the story were read out as a bedtime story, the audience would have nightmares . . .

Migration as a fate

I am an experienced migrant. I was born in the early 1970s in Tito's prosperous, developing (from foreign loans) and apparently calm Yugoslavia. It was not difficult for me to understand why some relatives lived in Germany – since they were so-called Danubian Swabians, they escaped from the Vajdaság area in 1944, from the approaching Soviet army and Russian partisans. A relative was to be found in Hungary as well: after World War II – since he had been conscripted in Governor Horthy's Hungarian Army – he had settled down in Budapest. The relatives in Germany opened up a happier and even more beautiful world for me – happiness manifested mainly through the products of Western consumer society: Adidas gym shoes (which were manufactured in Slovenia but were not available there), the orange juice served for breakfast, and some slush-fund. Many residents of my home village worked in Western Europe as guest workers. The only reason my parents did not emigrate to Germany – even when they would not have been employed as physical workers but could have been employed as, for instance, as a choir conductor – was because they thought that life standards and possibilities at home were simply enough for them. Certainly, if they had known what was to follow, I would – like both my grandmothers – be a German citizen too, and I would have by no means become a writer of Hungarian articles, studies and books. And this case study would not exist.

The gist is: I derive from an environment within which migration never counted as a deviant way of life or as a means of escape; on the contrary, it was a well respected method for social ascendancy, a well-known strategy. Furthermore, nowadays it is nearly recommended, as the local minority and the Hungarian political elite stress: staying at home (what is seemingly preferred by the elite themselves) is not inherently worth it. The fly in the ointment is that when the migrant returns to his homeland as a rich uncle for a few weeks a year, trying to play the

role of the successful man, everyone knows that he stands in the lower third of the social hierarchy abroad.

War times

There is a twist in the plot. In 1991, the Yugoslavian war broke out. During the summer more and more stories were heard about young people who had been conscripted as soldiers but had escaped to Hungary. It was a topic among our friends as well because in September we were to march in the regular Yugoslavian Army, which was not burdened by crimes of war at that time. Although many told us to emigrate – our parents were so frightened that they did not dare ask us these questions – I and one of my friends decided to march. We had a prosaic reason: we were enchanted by Géza Ottlik's novel *School at the Frontier*, which takes place in a military primary school, in a totalitarian institution. We were simply curious whether or not all this worked as our favourite novelist had written. We later realized that our curiosity was nonsense. Reality never imitates art in such a way. Especially, not during war.

During the approximately one-year period, I met several refugees for whom I had to care as a soldier since I was my regiment's scrivener. I also met weeping mothers who had not only lost their sons but all of their fortunes as well – but the army officers were insensitive to their problems, or they simply could not help them. I was shocked by the fate of high-ranking officers, who had originally been veterinary surgeons and with whom I had spent a lot of time with them, escaping from Sarajevo. They could hardly get out, and it turned out that they would have to resign all of their future plans and careers. Instead of a secure military career, each of them now received a military bed; several doctors with the rank of colonel lived together in the hall of the barrack's club, and they kept their civilian things in sacks, if they had anything at all. This was the time when I understood how difficult it is to start a new life from scratch – what it means to escape, to migrate.

Since I worked as a messenger as well, I had the chance to escape to Hungary, but even the thought of escaping made me tremble. I did not dare take the risk. One time, I nearly decided to leave – we were spying along the Serbian-Hungarian borders, but I would have had to “neutralise” the border guard. Even though Serbian squads (“our squads”)

were already shooting at Bosnian Muslims those times, I was not cruel enough to shoot a fellow soldier (and Bosnian Muslim) dead.

Peacetimes

On 28th September 1992, a week after I left the army, I travelled to Budapest. I had previously won a scholarship from the Hungarian Government to the International Institute for Preparation, where students who were members of the Hungarian ethnic minority in neighbouring countries were prepared for university admission exams. In our case it was nearly ridiculous, since we should have passed our Hungarian final exams in a secondary school instead.

The one-year visa was arranged by the Institute; as I remember, it took nearly five weeks until our passports were returned and the visas were granted. But at least we did not have to settle anything in person. Oh, happy peacetimes!

Pretty girls preferred

Next autumn, I began my studies at university. This time our hearts were still filled with joy: I was admitted to university, obtained a scholarship, managed to gain accommodation at a students' hostel. It even seemed logical that the visa would be granted for one more year. Our registration requirement was settled at the hostel; the scholarship papers and the school-attendance certification were given to us at the university. I think it could not have been very hard to obtain because I do not even remember it. In the autumn of 1994, we had to queue with the most recent version of our papers at the Alien Police headquarters on Izabella Street in Budapest. At first, I had to wait for seven hours; then another time for five. Fortunately, I and a dear, old female friend of mine went there together, and the time passed more quickly.

But we observed how some of our fellow sufferers were moving within the building and, since the end of the line was there, on the yard. We knew some of these people from the hostel; they were the older, law students deriving from Transylvania (Romania) and Kárpátalja (Ukraine), and they were pacing – out of the office, into the office. They had brought hamburgers and ate in front of us as we leaned against the staircase barrier. Then, not much later, after they went into the office

one more time, they left urgently. And we were left standing there – hungry and thirsty, without the possibility to go to the lavatory.

But the real surprise was when my female friend and I finally stood in front of the official in charge. I still remember the name and the face of Mr. F. I politely let B. go into the office first. Everything was settled quickly, so B. waited for me while I finished my business with Mr. F. This was the first time I was shocked. Pretty B.'s visa was granted for three years while mine was only granted for two years, even though we possessed the same papers. We came from the same place, lived in the same youth hostel, received the same scholarship amount, and were both the second-year students of the same university, although of different faculties. It was completely clear for us that Mr. F. simply practiced his discretionary power.

Migration as inspiration

These experiences inspired me to such an extent that next summer I wrote about them for an essay competition. I won first prize. This example provided a frame for thinking about the concepts of homeland, home and alien status. But I have continued to record my experience of migration and travelling in writing. Even today when I see customs officers, policemen or border guards, I feel ill. I am simply frightened of smugglers. I wrote a short story about them, about cross-border “cultural” barter, and a study about guest workers’ culture of sufferance because these topics are always fresh and very inspiring. As Günther Grass says, “Best books in English are written by emigrants, just like as here, in Germany there are also splendid books written by Turkish people, and it is like this in many other countries. They make us richer.” Yes, maybe – but while one is an earthly mortal person, a simple wanderer – an emigrant or immigrant – one feels nothing from this richness.

To stay or to leave

Two years later, I prolonged my passport under more cultured circumstances. The office was somewhere near Hősök tere (Heroes’ Square) in Budapest. In my final-year of studies, I started working at home, in Novi Sad, and until I obtained my degree, I was commuting. At that time, I did not want to solicit for a new visa or a settlement permit

because I had neither the legal basis nor the money to do so. With the onslaught of the Kosovo conflict in 1998, we were experiencing eventful times in Serbia. Working for the independent media as a kind of maverick intellectual, I had many things to write about. Nearly none of my peers returned to the Vajdaság area; at least 90 percent of them stayed in Hungary, and although with much difficulty, they finally obtained Hungarian citizenship.

But on 24th March 1999, NATO forces started bombing Yugoslavia – even though I never treated this country as my homeland, it had somehow felt natural for me to be a Yugoslav citizen. And since one time I had served this “homeland” as a soldier – giving all that it asked of me, I still think that this state has some kind of debt towards me. I left the country on 23rd March in order to take a literary prize in Budapest. One day before, on 22nd March, an employee of the Beograd Hungarian Embassy with whom I had contact as a maverick intellectual called me up to tell me to leave the country because the bombardment would soon begin and they would also soon leave. Since my ticket was valid for the next day, I told him I would go nowhere that day. I packed hardly anything in my bag because, on the one hand, I thought that I would go there for only a few days and, on the other hand, I did not want to seem like an escapee at the border. Nevertheless, I definitely felt and knew that there would be bombardments; I also knew that I would probably stay in Hungary, since I did not want to come home to war. The Serbian border guard congratulated me on my literary prize while the Hungarian one asked me whether or not I had a return ticket. I had bought a return ticket, but it was in order to deceive the Serbian authorities, not the Hungarian authorities.

I escaped to a NATO member state from the bombardments of NATO forces, to a country that had become a member of the military alliance 8 days earlier. It was really astonishing how Serbian intellectuals who had escaped to Budapest were cursing NATO and Hungary – being among its member states – while they did not really escape from the NATO forces but rather from Serbian authorities. In the beginning we had hoped that President Slobodan Milošević would soon capitulate and we would be allowed to go home. In those times one could spend 30 days in Hungary with a valid Yugoslavian passport without any kind of further requirement. But the days were passing, and the intensity of the bombardments only grew. It was necessary to search for some

kind of work and in order to obtain permission to remain in Hungary. I visited my Beograd acquaintance in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but he did not help. He recommended that I go to Romania after 30 days but then return immediately. Naturally, I knew this kind of artifice from earlier, from those who did not settle their papers, but they did not dare go back to Yugoslavia because of their liability for military service. But Romanian borders are not that close, so I solicited for refugee status. I visited the Hungarian President of the Helsinki Committee before applying; he also could only recommend that somewhere I should cross the state border and return immediately; the Hungarian border guards would not keep me up. They would not leave me at no man's land, since I am after all Hungarian. He told me that I would not be granted refugee status because working as a maverick journalist was not proof that I was chased or that any trouble would happen to me upon returning to Yugoslavia. The fact that in the meantime the 12th floor of the building where I worked burst into flames was also not a guarantee. My colleagues survived it by hanging from cables; fortunately, none of them died. Only those who were caught in the lift had, but they had worked for another company. It also meant nothing that the regime was having journalists killed since nothing special happened to me and generalizations did not matter. In other words, the Hungarian authorities could have granted me refugee status only if I had been killed or at least beaten half-dead because of my work as a journalist and not for any other reason.

Sealed pieces of paper and illegal writing

My days as an emigrant were passing, and there was nothing else to do but make my plea to the refugee authorities. My passport was confiscated, and they gave me a piece of paper. It was my temporary identity card. My name, a few pieces of personal data, and the address of my accommodation (I was taken in by a friend) were printed on it. No photograph. Even the seal looked as if a child could have made a better one; in other words, it was easy to forge. I do not know that if I had been stopped by policemen whether or not they would have believed me that I had refugee status since this simple piece of paper was a bit suspicious.

I spent time with another writer who had also escaped from the Vajdaság area with his family. I gave interviews to German, Japanese and Hungarian television networks, even to the South African reporter

of the *Wall Street Journal* who was at that time working in Budapest as an expert on Yugoslavian affairs. My writer friend thought that we had better turn to the President of the Republic for citizenship. Since he was also a writer, perhaps he would show some solidarity with us. I myself thought that I would look for some type of governmental support. It was a bad decision. Although I managed to quicken the process, I was granted only a tolerated-migrant status, which was enough to only become an idler because it did not grant employment rights. Fortunately, it was possible to write illegally, on the condition that employment controllers never catch someone who breaks the law of employment while he or she is writing illegally. But if I had worked in the building industry... And so many people say that writing is not dangerous.

Some years later at a birthday party, I asked the question of the then Prime Minister: do you know that a cross-border writer whose works are published in a Hungarian newspaper and would like to get some honorary for them is really an illegal worker? Does he break the law if he wants to get his honorary without a social insurance contribution with which he will never get old age pension in this country? Since it was impossible to obtain the money – unless the given newspaper was willing to commit some kind of fraud – I also wrote gratis several times. I do not know how other countries regulate these things, but it does not seem logical at all that someone who sells a piece that s/he wrote as a tolerated migrant, without labour permit, will get no salary but must ask for state allowances.

In the meantime, the Serbian regime was overthrown. 11 days later the immigration authority would have granted the prolongation of my visa for one more year, but I decided to ask for my passport back. At least I would be able to visit my parents. For a while, I lived in Budapest; then I moved home, migrating back to Serbia for the second time.

At home again – among attractions and repulsions

I got a scholarship, wrote a book, but then I ran out of air. I lived in a village, which was often boring and where Internet was very slow. In October-November 2006, I got an employment offer about which I had to think twice. My used-to-be patrons had gained positions in an institute financed primarily by state funds, and they had invited me to work for them. Furthermore, the work was related to my profession;

I had work experience, and even my university degree was maximally adequate. What arguments did I have for staying or migrating? What arguments, according to the push and pull migration model?

I had few arguments to stay in the village, apart from the fact that most of the times I felt good, lived comfortably and even had money because I had work and, moreover, no bosses. I worked as a freelancer. I could show up only for four months of employment (and health and pension insurance at the same time). On the other hand, this work was the most valuable: it meant much more to be legally employed in an EU-member state than it meant to be employed in any position in the still uncertain Serbia. My friends, acquaintances, peers – that is, my reference group – also always treated believed that if one gets a good offer somewhere, then one should accept it. Financial forces were the main reason the majority decided to become guest workers or emigrants – in the last years, war as such did not push people towards emigration. At the same time, unskilled and skilled workers looked for work in Slovenia and Crna Gora not only for financial reasons but also because they were welcome there. They were (and still are) transported with micro-buses; their employer immediately settle their papers. Because of this, they would rather go there than to geographically closer Hungary, from where they could travel home to their families every weekend. But their general experience of Hungary is that they are deceived by employers, their papers are not settled and they cannot cope on their own. As I see it, Hungary has ceased to be a destination country for skilled workers while the distant – and EU member state – Slovenia has become one. Only one social group wants to reach Hungary: young people who wish to be employed as physical workers (for example, as storekeepers or porters) because the multinational companies that hire them are adept at obtaining permits and because these people are willing to live at workers' hostels and work for subsistence wages. But the only people who are ready to accept such circumstances are those who have no other possibilities at home.

Otherwise, every highly qualified person from our village who wanted to leave left long ago, and from among those who studied in Hungary, hardly anyone returned home. At the most, they are people – economists, traders, entrepreneurs, etc. – who use their Hungarian contacts in order to mediate between the business worlds of Hungary and Serbia.

Professional possibilities and certain employment were one of the attractive forces for emigration. But due to the prices in Budapest, the seemingly high salary was enough only for earlier life standards, if even for that. Furthermore, the city where I lived for 8–9 years would be familiar; I have many friends there, even my brother lives there. It arose that even if my work fails, I can at least finish the immigration authorisation in Hungary, and I would have the opportunity to hand in my naturalisation application. Besides, the law was very favourable at those times, since not only both of my grandfathers were born as Hungarian citizens (both of them in 1905) but even my father in 1942, when the Hungarian Army retook (invaded) the Northern part of Yugoslavia. Furthermore, although I was a member of Hungarian writers' associations – and, due to the nomination of a certain minister, the member of the board of trustees in one of them – it was becoming more and more difficult to obtain tourist visas for these visits. Within 180 days only a 30-day-long residence was assured by the visa instead of 90 days, and the full implementation of the Schengen acquis was approaching. From the autumn of 2006 the Hungarian Consulate in Szabadka was very strict with granting visas. I heard many horror stories about the number of days it took people to get their visas, if they even had the courage to hand in their applications; many did not even attempt to apply because they knew that it was basically hopeless. The border was gradually closed to common people, even artists. For example, a musician was not granted a visa because he did not have a permanent residence in Serbia, although he was invited to an event that was supported by the Hungarian Ministry of Cultural Affairs.

To tell the truth, I could enumerate several persuasive reasons, but fewer and fewer things made me want to stay. In November 2006, my ex-boss in Újvidék (Novi Sad) called me: a government car was sent for me and I met the head of the provincial government and the president of the provincial parliament twice. I told them at once that I had decided to travel to Budapest; nevertheless, they promised me employment. Since they needed a young, Hungarian intellectual, they even offered me a position as a representative for the colours of the given party in the Parliament of the Republic. What a pity that I never desired a career as a politician!

Official difficulties

If I had known what was waiting for me, being employed in Hungary only until the middle of July 2007, I might have stayed home and undertaken the government position. By December 2006, I finally decided to move, even if I had deliberately told my parents that I would move 240 kilometres further.

One of my faults was that I was not knowledgeable about employment conditions in Hungary. Around Christmas, while playing billiards I learned from a mate who had already been working in Hungary that the employer has to first ask for a labour permit at the regional centre of labour, and this may take several months. It came out of the blue! I had thought that from 1st February I would be able to work. Why I believed this, I cannot explain today. I had deduced it from the previous experience of others: those who are regularly employed by a company can obtain the necessary papers relatively quickly. When I tried to obtain information from my friends and acquaintances about what I needed and where I could find these things, I learned nothing. The majority of them were already permanent residents, and they did not want to remember. Furthermore, it seemed to be a procedure that can take several years. My brother, for example, required more than ten years to organise his residence status because he was unwilling to subject himself to humiliating medical examinations. Data and places – the overall timetable of the procedure – were mixed up within them like this. As if they had wanted to forget about all, as social psychology claims, these bad, uncomfortable experiences were simply cleared out of their brains. “Oh, leave me alone with this, I cannot remember” “How was it...?” “So I have no idea, but it was long ago, thank god” “Ask someone else” “Come on, don’t annoy me with it, I am glad that all of it ended.” Their only useful advice was to contact an attorney specialising in this area. Finally, I managed to obtain the phone numbers of two attorneys.

I visited one of them. The lawyer looked helpful; yes, he said, they could help me. I would have to pay only if I received the visa. I knew this was misinformed, since I had had to obtain a residence visa and a labour permit. I told him that I would have a decent salary at a decent company and a contract of tenancy. The attorney mentioned the difficulty involved in obtaining a labour permit for a profession like mine in which there is not a labour shortage. In these cases, the Centre of Labour Force

Affairs can almost certainly find some kind of problem. For the application, we could choose a custodial position, which is needed everywhere. It was also possible to go through another company with significant manpower, but we should write it for more than the subsistence wage so that they could not disapprove anything. I needed to undergo certain medical examinations, but if I did not want to, no problem. They could also obtain a certificate for ten thousand HUF that stated that I am capable of working. The lawyer also told me that there was a high degree of skill needed to in applying to the Centre of Labour Force Affairs. Since it might have counted as discrimination, Serbian language skills were not to be mentioned as a skill required by the job. Later I discovered that although such a requirement can be noted, no-one is actually interested in these things – even though language skills are nearly always listed as a requirement in advertisements for jobs demanding more qualification. The lawyer provided me with a few blank copies of the application. If I did not choose the “custodial version,” I could take them to the company to have them completed, and then they would help me obtain the residence permit and, finally, the settlement permit. In the end, I would have paid about 250 €. I left the attorney’s office with a headache. How much would this whole procedure cost? When could I finally start working? It was already February 2007...

At the end of January, I rented a flat from one of my acquaintances – three minutes walking-distance from my prospective workplace, in the centre of the downtown. The flat was a bit expensive, 220 € per month, but I would not have been able to find a cheaper or better one, even if I had looked more thoroughly. Plus, the overhead expenses (gas, electricity, water) were about 100 € per month. Internet and television were indispensable for my work. I visited one of the Internet providers, but their conditions were horrible – there was a long- waiting period and a large advanced-payment. Fortunately, one of my friends worked for a cable television, internet and telecommunications company; therefore, it “only” took me a month obtain these services.

My labour papers were not settled very quickly, either. If I had been a Hungarian citizen, I would have already signed the contract and could have started working within a few days time. But I am a third country national, a Serbian citizen, and this is one of the worst “references” in Europe nowadays. Since foreigners are rarely employed there, the legal advisor provided to me by the company did not have much experience

in these matters. The vacancy and employment opportunity had to be reported to the Labour Authority. When such a vacancy is listed, anyone can apply for the position, but EU-citizens enjoy an advantage. Only if no such person applies can they grant the permit based on the received (in this case, my) application. The lawyer and I racked our brains for how to list the position: what were the qualifications specific to me? My university training, Serbian language skills, several years of working experience, publications . . . Although in Serbia I had worked within the black (or, rather, grey) economy, I could certainly bring some type of certification. Then, I had to show my Serbian secondary school reports. The only problem was that my bilingual school report had been already been asked for by the Budapest university, and in the interim, they had lost it. In the Vajdaság area, I only received a certificate of completion in Serbian. I had to have this translated by an official Hungarian technical translator's office, for about 20 € per page. I used a trick: in the Vajdaság area, in the settlements inhabited by a Hungarian majority as well as within the whole area of the province, Hungarian counts as an official language. That is, papers published in Hungarian are as valid as those in the state language. Therefore, I asked a translator of the local self-government to translate my papers – since he is an acquaintance of mine, he did it for free. The “funniest” aspect of this scenario is that my Hungarian university degree required my secondary school reports. I could not have received the degree without them. Why was it necessary? I have never known.

While I was collecting my papers, the attorney called me up: “Don't you have a wife who happens to be a Hungarian citizen? Because I am looking at the law, and if you had one, we could spare this whole labour permit procedure.” – “Unfortunately”, I replied, “I do not happen to have a Hungarian wife and no wife at all.” “Then it is time for you to think about this question, too” – he laughed.

My name is also a permanent problem. In Serbia, Hungarian names are transcribed according to Serbian orthographical rules: Tóth becomes Tot, Kovács becomes Kovač, etc. In my passport my name is indicated with Serbian orthography, but in my degree with Hungarian. Although everyone in Serbia has gained the right to have his/her name written in official papers, identity cards, passports, etc. with their native language's orthography, it is nearly impossible to effectuate in practice. At the same time, the majority of Hungarian authorities cling to the “official” name,

as per the passport. Since I myself had filled in the application form, they made an exception for my address card. In other words, an ethnic-Hungarian foreigner can officially write his name according to the Serbian orthography-rules but use Latin letters.

Further difficulties

As is often said in folk tales, time wore on. I do not know when exactly the lawyer handed-in the application for a labour permit, sometime in the second half of March 2007. In the meantime, my passport was filled with stamps because of my many travels, and there was not enough space for a new visa. Fortunately, at home I used to play football with one of the policemen, and I was able to obtain my new passport within a day. I showed my ministerial paper and did not have to stand in line. I tried to contact one of the consuls. It was alright, but this time it turned out that I should have only spent 30 days out of 180, instead out of 90, in Hungary; the consulate official recognized this discrepancy. “And have you used up your thirty days?” he asked. “No, no,” I replied in my surprise. I lied. “Did the border guards ask nothing?” “No, no,” I said. This was true since my data is not always recorded at the border. Furthermore, I had previously heard from one of my acquaintances, who owns a café in a border village that is visited by border guards, that the border guards were unofficially ordered not to count days for Hungarians from the Vajdaság area. This time I was fortunate. One of the consuls knew my name and my writings; he did what he could do as soon as possible, but the most important was that I received my visa for 90, instead of 30, days. This was important because it allowed me to travel back to Hungary. If they had carefully counted the days I spent there, I would not have received more – which were necessary simply because of the further procedures I had to do – and I could have even been expelled from the country. On a larger scale, this means that people (i.e. Serbian citizens) who cannot obtain a C-type visa due to lack of permanent work, residence, fortune, insurance, etc., cannot settle their official affairs in Hungary in order to obtain a D-type visa and are forced to hire an expensive lawyer. Since my C-type visa was once again in order, I was endlessly pleased.

The Schengen *acquis* meant a long waiting period for me. A month elapsed, and the Labour Authority gave me no answer. On the 2nd of

May, the attorney called me: completion of my documents was necessary. A photocopy of my Hungarian university degree was not enough. Only a notarized copy was sufficient. Success! It cost only 7 €. Since these signs indicated that there was no one who had applied for the job, I experienced every single small result as happiness. True, the attorney had mentioned that a sociologist had applied for the job, but he had talked him out of it very quickly. I do not remember accurately enough: at first the job had to be advertised for a month. Did the company then hand in my application? I was waiting for the post and sustaining permanent e-mail contact the lawyer. I was waiting for some kind of message. Finally, he called me: I was granted the permit! I ran to the Labour Authority and waited for two hours, but it turned out that the document had already been sent to the company. True, the lawyer had directly asked them not to send it by post because it would mean a loss of time, yet they posted it. Three weeks later, the letter from the same district arrived.

Since the contract signed with the company had to be handed in, the one-year-long labour permit was valid from 1st May 2007. The attorney also knew that it could be signed only for one year, even though we were unable to determine when we would get the permit or if we would get it at all. Like this, the contract was implicitly valid from May to the end of April next year. Because of the post, three weeks were lost. It was at this time when I checked the Office for Immigration and Naturalisation's (hereinafter: OIN) homepage for information regarding the requirements for a D-type visa. I had some kind of routine, so I knew that it was no use collecting the papers in advance since they always ask for the latest one. I contacted another attorney's office and asked if they could help me. They said they could not. I had suspected this since two months earlier the news had been published that the National Security Service was examining those who were involved in the migration business. They do it well, I thought, since a few years earlier I attended a very exclusive conversation about whether or not to grant dual citizenship for cross-border Hungarians. The used-to-be President of the Republic, Minister for Foreign Affairs, President of the Academy of Sciences, world-renowned economists, political scientists and writers were present at this event; it was considered to be new information when I mentioned that those who have enough money and want to will evidently immigrate and receive citizenship, since many attorneys' offices are specialised in this field; although corruption cannot be proved, it is

impossible not to realise that not only ethno-business but migrant and citizenship business exist as well. The greatest brains of the country and of the nation listened in surprise; perhaps they did not even believe this from a young man from the Vajdaság area. I had never felt more strongly than at this time that alienation from everyday reality accompanies the appreciation and wisdom one gains as s/he becomes more accomplished in her/his profession.

Only at one point during the whole procedure did I feel as if it would be possible to bribe certain officials. It is nearly useless to do so; you still have to wait for everything, and the low-ranking officials who are in charge rarely make serious decisions – they only take the papers. Perhaps the procedure can be quickened if you have some influential friends. One can gain a few days; perhaps one does not have to queue, but this is all. And this is an unimportant advantage, not worth a large payment, and why would an official risk his or her job for a small sum? In this sense, the system may not be so bad, but on the other hand, it is overcomplicated; it entails extra costs even for the state itself.

The attorney wrote a new contract of employment that would have been valid from the day when the labour permit was granted, from the beginning of May, on the condition that it would become valid on the second day of the employment visa. I went to the bank where I have had my bank account for years and asked for a certificate that indicated that I had enough money to live on until I received my first pay check. This certificate cost 3 €. I did not even wonder whether or not I had health insurance, although the OIN's web page indicated that I did. As I understand, there is a valid treaty between Serbia (the former Yugoslavia) and Hungary regarding health care. An employee at the attorney's office insisted that the contract of tenancy was unnecessary and that it would have to be handed in with the application for a residence permit while on the web page of the OIN and of the Consulate in Szabadka (Subotica) it was indicated as a criterion. I tried to call the Consulate, but I could only reach an answering machine. I pressed the appropriate buttons, but I learnt nothing. How much the long-distance call abroad, I have no idea. Anyway, I decided that we were to sign a contract with my tenant (together with two witnesses), and I would obtain the title page from the flat's land registry. The Land Office became one of my favourite agencies: if one is there at 7.00 am, exactly at opening time, the case can be solved relatively quickly for 16 €. I thought that once I was

there, I would ask for two copies, and later, I regretted not having done so. Only one thing consoled me: later, I could not have used the other copy because a month had elapsed since it had been published...

What else is necessary?

Perhaps I had settled everything, so I travelled home. In our village I went to the photographer one more time. There an old lady, who had possibly been a guest worker in Germany, indignantly complained that here the service was nearly three times more expensive than in the West. And we even had to queue! Certainly this exemplifies the relationship of demand and supply; no doubt that photographers are between the most important beneficiaries of the visa business.

I travelled back to Szabadka and turned in the visa application; fortunately, I did not have to queue for it. True, it is not possible to pay the 50 € fee at the office – you are sent to a bank, but this is nothing. Though, it is useful to know that the sum is really 52 € because there is a transaction fee that must also be paid to the bank. However, my joy was short-lived: I could not attach the photocopies of my two witnesses' identity cards for the contract of tenancy. How could I have known? I should have sent it via fax from Budapest, the official told me. I did not have to settle this in person. Yes, but one of the two witnesses was in London, and the other was often in the country-side. The latter I managed to call. He had left the photocopy in a pub, but I had to wait for the other witness. When he returned, I sent the photocopies via fax. I solicited for the visa in the beginning of July, and I was very excited because the web page indicated and an official also mentioned that the time of adjudging was only 4–8 weeks. (Since the entry into force of the 2nd Act, 2007 it is now only 30 days.) I asked the official in Szabadka by whom my documents would be adjudged. By the Ministry of Interior, namely by the OIN, he said. The only problem was that there is no more Ministry of Interior in Hungary. He was evidently thinking of the Ministry of Justice and Law Enforcement. It was also clear for me that it would have been useless to call up some of my acquaintances for positive discrimination. They could not quicken the procedure. But I simply do not understand why a series of documents, permits, certificates published by Hungarian authorities are controlled by yet another Hungarian authority. Is it so that more officials have work? Perhaps the Hungarian author-

ities do not trust each other? Is it the certain freedom of large degree about which the Lawmaker speaks about in the preamble of the 39th Act, 2001, about the entry and residence of third country nationals? According to this act *“As for the grant of D-type visa, member states enjoy a freedom of large degree, but EU-interests connected with the security of exterior border-lines must be considered. We also considered the characteristic legal solutions of the member states during the elaboration process of these rules.”*

What is the “characteristic legal solution”? The mutual control of each other? The complication of the process? And why is (was) it true that lawyer’s offices were unable over the course of five years to learn that the D-type employment visa *“assures possibility of residence for at most one year long, without any kind of further permits.”* Thus, no separate residence permit is necessary.

Happy End?

I was informed in July that my employment visa was ready. Five weeks had elapsed since the application; I did not have to wait until the eighth week. Other good news! The times I had spent at home in Serbia and included the 90 days ensured by my C-type visa. Based on the seals in the passport, it was nearly impossible to reconstruct exactly how many days I had spent in Hungary. Naturally, I did not receive my employment visa for a year, and since the Labour Authority had granted the permit from May 2007 through April 2004, nine weeks were lost. Consequently, a one-year-long visa cannot exist in practice. But then why is it advertised?

The next day, a Wednesday, I travelled to Budapest and checked in with the company at once. On Thursday, we signed the new contract, and I went to settle the residence permit. I obtained an application form (from the local district’s government), and we made another contract of tenancy with the latest date, from the day of the granting of the visa (lest they insist that the earlier one was “invalid”). The lawyer called one of his old acquaintances, an old university buddy who was adept at this field. If I understood correctly, he worked for the OIN, and he told what exactly I had to bring with me. He said that the contract of tenancy and the visa were enough. Great – I had everything!

I started my next – and I hoped last – adventure on Monday morning. The temperature outside was around 40 degrees Celsius, but fortunately,

the air conditioning was on in the OIN building. I took a number in line and started reading. Oh, the old queuing times! And I could also smoke in the yard. After one and half hours, I went out and smoke another cigarette. A young man was also smoking beside me; there was a badge on shirt that read “official in charge.” I turned to him and said that I had previously called to ask a simple question; we started talking, and it turned out that I taken the wrong type of number. I only needed to register my address and did not need a residence permit. And, the application form was not right at all; I needed a completely different one. Since turning in my visa application in Szabadka, a whole month had passed, and I needed the latest page of titles from the land register. He kindly explained it to me and handed me the appropriate application form, just for me, as he said. Where can anyone else receive it? We started laughing because the new act would come into force on the 1st, the new decrees would become law, and even they, the competent officials, were not completely aware of the new rules. To top it off, in half a year completely new acts would come into force because of the Schengen acquis.

This time, the only problem was that the flat owner was in the country-side, and I would only be able to receive his signature next day. I ran to the Land Office, but by that time there was a line, so I decided to come back next morning at 7. a.m. Aware of my own routine, I explained to others where to queue, where to pay, how to fill in the blanks – I finished very quickly, for 16 € one more time.

On Wednesday the OIN opens at 1.00 p.m. I was there 40 minutes earlier. While Monday is normally a “Chinese day,” today there were more Japanese people arriving, with their legal advisors. I had time to think again. I thought, for example, about how a person can involuntarily give in to prejudices by seeing how quickly the Chinese can settle their affairs. Dostoevsky could write a brilliant novel about this topic – *The Insulted and Humiliated*.

I was the third client of the official in charge, and I did not have to wait long. I still believed that I would get some kind of identity card. But he only took the papers, checked them, tore the edge of the application form, sealed it, gave it back to me and said: “We are finished.” “What?” I asked. “Then where should I go now?” “Nowhere,” he said with a dull face. And I, with a smile on my face and a straight back, quickly left the people who were still sitting in the lodge.

But it was not the end yet: I had to obtain a heap of papers for the company as well. I had to be registered at the National Health Insurance Office, and I did not manage to settle this the first time either. I had to go to a private old age pension insurance office, then obtain a tax identification number. I had to attend a lecture series about labour and fire safety and ask for a certificate of a clean criminal record for 10 € at the Office of Criminal Records (what do they know about me there?). The factory doctor also sent me to a wide range of medical examinations: at first I had to find a general practitioner, then blood and urine examinations, ophthalmology, EKG – each with a 300 HUF fee. The pulmonary examination cost 18 €, because, even though I visited a consulting room in the given district and even though it is inscribed that the examination is *free* for local residents, I had not had my insurance for more than six months. The ophthalmologist said that it would cost an additional 28 € to evaluate the laboratory findings; therefore, it would be better to have them evaluated by the factory doctor.

Epilogue – and my costs

I was not surprised that some of my expenses were very costly within these six months, although not unbearably so. Since then, I have been on diet. And if they had been very violent, I could ask for sick-leave.

During the employment procedure, there are costs directly connected with the procedure itself: two medical examinations (~104 €), two certificate from the Land Office (32 €), visa and transaction fee (52 €), bank certificate (2,5 €), notarized university degree (6,5 €), application forms, photocopying, photographs (~14 €), phone calls for information, fax (20 €), travelling home and back, within the city (~300 €). In total, it is at least 550 €. But there are direct costs apart from these as well while the procedure is in progress and one is commuting from office to office between the two countries. Let us say that in my case during the six month period it was 400 € per month. Although some of these costs were not completely necessary. For example, I could have stayed at home from January to July, but I rented a flat for those six months I was without a salary. Together with the overhead costs, it is 2,400 €. That is to say, if I had stayed at home and had had some work, at the moment I would be 5,000 € richer. Well, minus the costs of friendly beers while speaking with my acquaintances about how they had settled

their own papers or with my landlord and witnesses as we arranged the housing contract. These were really worth the price.

This is the end of the fairy tale: the poor lad gained his reward from the king after slaying all the dragons, only his health is worse than it used to be. In the meantime, he is consoling himself by reading the 2nd Act of the Republic of Hungary, 2001, about the entry and residence of third country nationals. It begins like this: *“The Parliament, for the sake of co-operation in the gradual creation of a European region based on liberty, security and rule of law, and the social and economical development of the member states of the European Union and states outside it, considering the content of § 58th of the Constitution, is herewith creating the following act about the entry and residence of third country nationals.”*

According to this, the social and economic development of the EU and countries outside it are the main interests of Hungary. Maybe I am misinterpreting the act because of my own personal affronts, but after reading it, I have the feeling that it prefers the interests of countries to the interests of people. It does not even speak about migrants. It is a further contradiction that the entry and residence of a third-country national are hampered by several factors that may be necessary for the security of the country or for the defence of the national labour force (?!), but it is much harder to believe that all of it contributes to the development of the country. After all, many analyses reveal that the existence of borders rather impedes economic and social development.