

HunEx News

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Spring 2008

Homecoming Forum 2008

by Aaron Imperiale

The 6th annual Homecoming Forum co-organized by the HungarianAmerica Foundation (HAF) took place on April 19 at the Hungarian Embassy in Washington, DC, and featured a panoply of speakers focusing on the themes of science & technology (S&T) and research & development (R&D) as catalysts for small-business growth and transatlantic entrepreneurship.

Where the presenters spanned the geographic gamut of S&T and R&D to include representatives from the National Academy of Sciences, the Delegation of the European Commission, the Embassy of France, the Hungary-based Bay Zoltan Foundation and the Hungarian medical company Semmelweis Innovations, the attendees solely consisted of expatriate Hungarians—approximately 50—living, working or studying in the United States.

In light of this dynamic, one sub-theme lay at the core of the conference: ways to encourage highly-skilled and experienced expatriate Hungarians to move back to their native land.

In his opening remarks, Ambassador Dr. Ferenc Somogyi pointed out that Hungarians had historically excelled in science, but that in the ever-globalizing world of the twenty-first century, “[Hungarians] have a lot to learn from abroad,” a subtle invitation for foreign-educated Hungarians to consider returning home.

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“ [Hungarians] have a lot to learn from abroad ”

—Ambassador Dr. Ferenc Somogyi



Ambassador Ferenc Somogyi opens the Forum

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Letter from the President



Sandor Vegh

Greetings on the occasion of the publication of this very special issue of *HunEx News* by the HungarianAmerica Foundation (HAF)!

This year we are celebrating our five year anniversary, but if we take into consideration the activities of HAF's predecessor—the Kossuth House Social Club—we can proudly say that we have been present on the Hungarian scene of Washington for ten years. Many things have changed since the early years of movie screenings and poetry nights—most significantly our focus, our audience, and therefore our mission.

There are other larger, wealthier, better established and more influential Hungarian-American organizations in and around

Washington; they all do excellent work in their respective areas, be it political, cultural, educational, fraternal, business or social. I believe in cooperation and unity, which had long been missing among expatriate Hungarians in the United States. I am pleased that this is no longer an issue in Washington. All local groups greatly respect and interact with each other: HAF cooperates in different capacities with many, and is a full member of two national organizations.

In this spirit, our approach has changed over the years from a let-us-do-everything-which-is-Hungarian attitude to a more focused mission which concentrates on our target audience—young Hungarian professionals—and on a few flagship projects such as the HunEx/Homecoming Forum, the different HunEx professional groups, and the Hungarian Language Program.

Our mission is ambitious: to build a strong and active local network that can be used as a template—to export around the country and even around the globe—facilitating the creation of similar organizations. Hungarian culture binds us and provides a framework for our activities, but it also serves as a bridge for non-Hungarians to join the group. We are building professional networks on top of existing social networks. While at the core we remain tied to Hungary, our international dimension is equally strong and continues to gain momentum.

Yet, running a non-profit organization poses significant challenges, and at the end of the day success is determined by the efforts of dedicated volunteers—or by hefty donations to finance a professional staff. HAF has never aggressively pursued fundraising initiatives nor enforced membership fees. Rather, we follow a model based on trust and mutual-respect: we are of the view that professionals genuinely interested in what HAF has to offer, will duly contribute either monetarily or through in-kind donations of time or other resources.

In that regard, we would extend to our readers an invitation to “brainstorm” with HAF to not only come up with new ideas but to also follow up on them with concrete action. I promise that HAF and the HunEx network will stand behind you. My dream is to see the emergence of a core HunEx group as part of the organization and larger network not simply made up of “passive members” but rather owned by “active partners.” I see this happening already and am optimistic for the continuation of this trend in the future.

In closing, allow me to thank the many individuals who have contributed in some way to the Hungarian Language Program, the Homecoming Forum, the HunEx Groups, and to this newsletter.

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Mission Statement

The HungarianAmerica Foundation, Inc., is a not-for-profit, 501(c)(3), tax-exempt organization, incorporated in the District of Columbia in 2003, for charitable, scientific, literary, and educational purposes.

In particular, the Foundation's goal is to promote Hungarian culture and traditions, foster Hungarian-American relations, and contribute to the mutual understanding of our two countries and peoples. We strive to achieve these goals through the cultural, educational, and professional projects that we frequently organize.

Submissions

HunEx News welcomes news items and letters from readers on matters of interest to the foundation. Address correspondence to Editor-in-Chief, *HunEx News*, HungarianAmerica Foundation, P. O. Box 27189, Washington, DC 20038-7189 or email haf@hungarianamerica.com. Material can be sent as a Microsoft Word document, PDF, or within an email. Articles will be edited for space. Accompanying artwork will be accepted in graphics file formats only (JPEG, TIFF, EPS), minimum 300 dpi.



Charles Wessner delivers his keynote address



Michel Israel and Astrid-Christina Koch

Following the Ambassador's comments, HAF President Dr. Sandor Vegh briefly reflected on the changing momentum of the "Homecoming" movement. When he asked the attendees for a show of hands of those intending to return to Hungary, approximately 30 percent responded in the affirmative.

Dr. Charles Wessner, Director of the Washington-based National Academy of Sciences focused on the comparative U.S. strengths over Europe in labor markets and open universities—key factors, in his view, for economic growth. "An American university consists of a Russian professor teaching math to a Chinese student," he stated half-jokingly.

Dr. Wessner also discussed the "prestige" factor imparted upon university docents, citing it as a potential hindrance to growth in the EU: many skilled and learned professionals remain in academia for "prestige-sake" as opposed to venturing out, opening businesses and creating employment—a less-prestigious undertaking in the European mindset—thereby contributing to a slowing of the economic landscape.

He highlighted the U.S. Government-supported Small Business Innovation and Research Program (SBIR) as a means of fueling transatlantic entrepreneurship for small and medium-sized firms.

The science and technology counselors of the Embassy of France—Dr. Michel Israel—and of the Delegation of the European Commission in Washington—Dr. Astrid-Christina Koch—both outlined their respective institutions' programs for encouraging the return of their U.S.-educated researchers and for small-business and foreign investment promotion in France and in the greater European Union.

In the Hungarian-specific portion of the program, Dr. Zsombor Lacza presented the benefits of his company—Simmelweis Innovations—for assisting returning Hungarian medical researchers with the reintegration process.

He outlined a "check-list" for expatriate Hungarians to run through when contemplating the grueling decision of whether or not to relocate to Hungary. "You cannot commute between two continents," he said. "It's either the U.S. or Europe. Ultimately, you have to decide: do I prefer the bigger house and large-screen TV, or the small flat and skiing in Switzerland?"

Dr. Lacza also highlighted the close association between Semmelweis Innovations and Semmelweis University—the largest medical research university in Hungary—where he also serves as director of the technology transfer department. The close relationship, he noted, allows for casting the web wide to reel in the greatest number of talented researchers, companies, students, and professionals.



Sandor Vegh introduces Zsombor Lacza of Semmelweis University

// You cannot commute between two continents. "It's either the U.S. or Europe. Ultimately, you have to decide: do I prefer the bigger house and large-screen TV, or the small flat and skiing in Switzerland?" //

— Zsombor Lacza

Dr. Norbert Babcsan of the Bay Zoltan Foundation for Applied Research discussed his organization's role in enhancing the effectiveness and position of Hungarian companies through innovation and technology transfer. As a physicist, Dr. Babcsan stressed what he called the "freedom of science" stating, "in science, you can do whatever you like when you have the motivation and support," emphasizing that his foundation was there to fill the lacuna of the latter.

To close off the formal presentation portion of the forum, Dr. Janos Nacsza, an HIV/AIDS researcher, exposed the concrete reality on the ground for young Hungarian scientists and researchers that return home.

He referred to consultations with four colleagues of the biotech field who had either made the transition or were seriously considering it, citing the myriad difficulties they had encountered, including the lack of transparency of the Hungarian tendering system, legal and regulatory burdens, EU-"conservative mentality" which dampens creativity, and a general lack of support—both financial and moral—for young and ambitious researchers looking to advance in their respective fields in Hungary.

The afternoon session of the Forum was left open for an informal discussion with the panelists and moderated by Mr. Balazs Erdei, S&T Attaché at the Hungarian Embassy and co-organizer of the Forum. The session also featured a question-and-answer exchange with Ms. Reka Mosteller Ferencz, Director of the Small Business Development Association of Aiken, South Carolina, and with Mr. Andras Juhasz, Hungarian Embassy Consular Section representative.

The day was capped off with a reception at the Kossuth House. 🍷



Norbert Babcsan, Aaron Imperiale and Lidia Vigyazo at the Kossuth House

This year's forum also had a more specific focus, research commercialization, or the notion that applied research and development results increasingly need to be transformed into economic growth, especially through knowledge-based start-up and spin-off small enterprises. In his opening remarks, Ambassador Ferenc Somogyi stated that Hungarian science has always been outstanding and internationally accepted, its linkages to industry, however, as well as its ability to churn out commercial ventures, are still rather limited. This is just one of the issues in which Hungary could learn a lot from its experienced returnees.

—Homecoming Summary Report by Balazs Erdei



Some of the participants of the Homecoming 2008 event at the Embassy of Hungary in Washington

HunEx-Econ, the Washington Group of Hungarian Economists

Building bridges, which a few already crossed ...



Sandor Sipos, Andras Bodor, Adam Kobar, Elod Takats, Sandor Karacsony, Attila Juhasz

HunEx Econ

HunEx-Econ, established in 2004, is a group of largely Washington-based economists and business professionals concerned about the state of the Hungarian economy. The Group strives to build and nurture an informal and nonpartisan network of professionals, providing a platform to exchange views on the current economic issues in Hungary and even to offer guidance and advice to economic policymakers in Hungary. The Group welcomes the cooperation of all professionals interested in analyzing economic policies in Hungary by offering their expert — yet non-partisan — advice.

The Group's strengths lie in its professional objectivity, nonpartisanship, and wide range of its members' professional backgrounds. Group members are professionals with international experience in the fields of economic policy, finance, competition policy, social policy and academic research. They are masters in their own fields who work easily with professionals from other areas.

The Group organizes conferences and roundtable discussions covering current issues regarding the Hungarian economy, as well as meetings and consultations with Hungarian economic policymakers; these fora give group members an opportunity to express their views directly to decision makers.

In accordance with recent trends, some members of the HunEx-Econ Group have moved back to Europe, symbolically crossing the bridge between the two continents which group had long been building so far with their work in the group.

Many of these members currently work for European public institutions, thus expanding the Group's widespread international presence and horizon. It is the cross-border cooperation among the members that has allowed the Group to develop high standards with multi-faceted views and take on the toughest questions of the Hungarian political economy. 🍷

The Group's main activities

1. **Co-organizing partner** with *Portfolio.hu* of the Pension Conference in Budapest in light of the on-going debate on pension systems
2. **Consultations with the following policy makers:**
 - a. Representatives of the Ministry of Finance and the National Bank of Hungary
 - b. Dr. Tibor Draskovics, State Reform Committee Executive
 - c. Mr. Peter Holtzer, European Public Advisory Partners
 - d. Mr. Csaba Kovacs, Hungarian Competition Authority
3. **Publication of the *HunEx-Econ Quarterly Newsletter***

The last four issues discussed the following topics:

 - a. Attila Juhasz and Adam Kobar: "Market Expectations for Central-Eastern Europe: What's next?"
 - b. Andras Bodor and Adam Kobar: "Does regulation on Default Asset Allocation Matter? — The Hungarian Experience of the Fully-Funded Defined Contribution Pension Scheme"
 - c. Adam Kobar and Istvan P. Szekely: "A Note on the Sovereign Credit Risk of Hungary"
 - d. Tamas K. Papp and Elod Takats: "Tax Rate Cuts and Tax Compliance — the Laffer Curve Revisited"
4. **The Group members hold brainstorming sessions on a regular basis to exchange views and discuss upcoming events**

The HunEx-Econ Group's next event will be a meeting with Mr. Csaba Csaki, member of the Monetary Council of the Magyar Nemzeti Bank and former World Bank adviser on farming issues. Mr Csaki will discuss current monetary policy issues with the Group.

The Group is open to new members; parties interested in joining or signing up for the newsletter should visit www.hungarianamerica.com/hunex-econ/.

Hungarian *Halászlé* Spiced with Nanotechnology — a HunEx-BioMed event

by Mihaly Bodo, Aaron Imperiale, Sandor Vegh

As other countries of the European Union, Hungary is struggling to stop up the brain drain. Many of its most talented scientists have either left or continue to leave the country for better opportunities and salaries abroad. Very few return.

One scientist who bucked the trend is Janos Szebeni, MD, Ph.D, D.Sc. Dr. Szebeni chose to resettle in Hungary two years ago after having lived and worked in the United States for 20 years.

After winning the prestigious Albert Szentgyörgyi Award in 2006, Dr. Szebeni returned to his homeland in order to conduct research at Semmelweis Medical University in Budapest. Following his tenure there, he became head of the Nanomedicine Department at Bay Zoltan Institute of Nanotechnology, an institution which already collaborates with his former employer in the U.S. — the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research.

Dr. Szebeni's current work involves the research and development of "nanomedicines" or "smart drugs" which, among other unique features, target a disease site with minimal side effects.

To celebrate his brief visit to Washington, HAF organized an informal gathering at Camp Olympic — or more widely known by local Hungarians as Benedek Farm — around some *halászlé* — a traditional Hungarian fish soup cooked in an enormous kettle over an open flame. Lajos and Kati Baranyi, a researcher couple living in the Washington area famous for their cooking skills, took charge of the culinary endeavor — enhancing it with another delightful dish: *túrós csusza*, or noodles with cottage cheese and bacon bit sprinkles.

It was a chilly, cloudy, gray day — more like November in Budapest — but the tasty dishes and savory aromas warmed up the 20 or so attendees all too accustomed to the Hungarian way of doing business: food first, chatter latter. About two hours into the event, Dr. Szebeni began his presentation.

In his introduction, Dr. Szebeni remarked that his institute has held a unique position in Hungary in that it has continued to receive government support for the past three years — a time lapse essentially serving as a grace period to allow for third-party grants to flow in.

Dr. Szebeni iterated that he has not regretted his decision to return to Hungary mainly because of the availability and expansion of professional opportunities for him personally — allowing him to pursue his research interests as he pleases.

In large part, though, this is due to the unique support that he has received from the Bay Zoltan Foundation and Semmelweis University. He did utter a word of warning to those in attendance: such a move should be made only after carefully considering and coming to terms with the economic and employment realities of present-day Hungary.

Dr. Szebeni pointed out many of the difficulties and adverse phenomena that a young researcher faces when making the move back to Hungary.

The first was an inefficient public procurement system: although the possibilities for a scientist to obtain financial support have significantly increased in Hungary recently, winning grants and achieving the stipulated goals often require the applicants to pass through lengthy — and often incomprehensible — administrative and bureaucratic barriers. The current procurement system, due to its enormous inefficiencies and bureaucratic hurdles, he said, is a drag on the entire process, greatly slowing small-scale research.



Zoltan Beck, Janos Nacsa, Lajos Baranyi, Mihaly Bodo



Janos Szebeni, head of the Department of Nanomedicine, BAY-NANO Institute of Applied Research

Another cog in the grant support system wheel is the "unpredictability" factor as regards funding: because all individual projects must pass through a single, centralized institution before receiving funding and then passed on to the next laboratory, one mistake or glitch in a lab report can halt the funding process dead in its tracks.

The result of these inefficiencies? Researchers stretched thin at every level — monetarily, scientifically, and physically — as they are forced to take on more projects than are realistically realizable, leading to overwork, frustrations and a constant fear of failure.

Indeed, dissatisfaction and frustrations at the workplace are widespread, but for Dr. Szebeni, such negativity is counterbalanced by a life at home with relatives, old friends, and a work-culture that for all its flaws, nonetheless familiar. Furthermore, luck, he said, is equally as essential an ingredient to the formula for success — both in a career and in life: it transcends boundaries, citizenship and paperwork.

In his concluding remarks, Dr. Szebeni emphasized that the greatest advantage of returning to Hungary lies in the definitive resolution of a constant dilemma that had tortured him throughout his career abroad: how to overcome home-sickness. As a seasoned scientist searching for truth, he has surely found a simple solution. 🍷

Learning Hungarian with HAF

Motivated students of all ages take on the challenge

by Joe Balintfy

Hungarian is categorized as a Finno-Ugric language. For students trying to learn Hungarian, “Finno-Ugric” might as well translate to “virtually-impossible.” Ranked as a Category II language by the Foreign Services Institutes (FSI), the training center of the U.S. State Department, Hungarian is one of a handful of languages highlighted as “typically somewhat more difficult for native English speakers to learn than other languages in the same category.” Only five languages, none of which use the Roman alphabet, fall in Category III (Arabic, Cantonese, Mandarin, Japanese and Korean) requiring more time to learn.

So why would someone embark on this challenge?

“For me, it will be a life-long vocation,” says Martha Schwieters. She is enrolled in a Beginner IV class offered by the HungarianAmerica Foundation (HAF), a Washington-based non-profit cultural organization. “One which connects me with my expatriate son, his charming Hungarian wife and their three lively children across 4000-plus miles.”

Others have a Hungarian blood-line, but little or no connection left to the language or culture.

“My grandparents emigrated from Hungary before World War I and never saw their homeland again,” explains Linda Dono in the Beginner II class. “My father, born in this country, spoke and read Hungarian before he learned English. But every member of my generation of the family has become totally American. No one knows Hungarian, and decades of Communist rule in Central Europe meant they lost touch with any cousins who decided to stay.”

Hungarians continued to immigrate to the United States during World War II and in the wake of the 1956 revolution when roughly 200,000 escaped. Although some transplanted families continued speaking Hungarian at home passing it on to their children, others lost the language.

“We have seen a variety of students enroll in the program,” says Sandor Vegh, HAF President. “From the beginning we assumed it would mostly be those who married a Hungarian, or have Hungarian roots. But the students really come from all kinds of backgrounds and sometimes don’t have any connection to Hungary.”

The first classes with HAF started in 2001. Since then, there has been a steady stream of beginner, intermediate and advanced students. There are as many as 40 students per semester with six to 12 pupils in each class. Instructors are professionally trained, native speakers who understand the challenges of the language, and the connections the students have to Hungary.

Emma Fekete in the Beginner IV class praises her teacher’s mix of conversation coaching, games and grammar exercise: “I look forward



It’s all smiles at the course completion ceremony



Instructor Ildiko Horovitz explains the inexplicable of Hungarian grammar

to my Hungarian class every Tuesday evening with great anticipation: they’re so much fun that I’m always amazed at how fast time flies, even at that late hour, even after a full day of work.”

“Learning a language like Hungarian with only one class a week is not easy,” admits instructor Ibolya Latran, who also teaches at FSI. “But continued study pays off, not only for their personal reasons, but because the richness of expression the Hungarian language can create is unique.” She jokes that even though homework isn’t always done on time, “these students show real dedication, determination and interest.”

The HAF Language Program is fortunate to be allowed access to the Kossuth House—just steps from the Dupont Metro in downtown Washington, DC—by HRFA Financial (www.HRFA.org). “Going to class in the Kossuth House is a little, weekly time travel to Hungary,” says Fekete. Classes are weeknights, 6:30-9:00 p.m.

The HAF Hungarian classes typically start in the Fall and Spring, and run for 12 weeks. Classes are frequently offered in the summer as well, depending on enrollment.

For more information or to sign up for a class, visit www.hungarianamerica.com/language or email language@hungarianamerica.com. 🇮🇸

Student Testimonials



Schwieters

Martha Schwieters, Beginner IV

If you love a Hungarian or are fascinated by the country's multi-faceted history and culture, the best way to act on that attraction is to study the *Magyar* language. For a linguistic expert, this may be relatively easy. For me, it will be a life-long vocation, one which connects me with my expatriate son, his charming Hungarian wife and their three lively children across 4000 miles. Starting as late in life as I did, I realize that I will never achieve complete fluency, but I truly enjoy every minute of the weekly session at Kossuth House. The classes are varied and challenging. Interacting with the other students (all much younger than I) is stimulating. Best of all, our teacher imparts not only flawless, up-to-the-minute diction, vocabulary and (polite) slang expressions, but also wonderful insights about life as it is lived in Hungary — all for a tiny fraction of a flight to Budapest. And when I do have that wonderful opportunity, my HungarianAmerica classes make visiting Hungary all the more meaningful. Join us!



Dono

Linda Dono, Beginner II

I decided to learn Hungarian because I recently discovered Hungarian-speaking relatives in Slovakia, and I may have other second cousins in Hungary. My grandparents emigrated from Hungary before World War I and never saw their homeland again. My father, born in this country, spoke and read Hungarian before he learned English.

But every member of my generation of the family has become totally American. No one knows Hungarian, and decades of Communist rule in Central Europe meant that they lost touch with any cousins who decided to stay. Language classes through the HungarianAmerica Foundation are a wonderful opportunity to learn Hungarian from native speakers. My father and grandparents are dead, and few colleges offer courses. I have lived in a half-dozen places around the country, and Washington is the first place I have had the chance to learn Hungarian.



Fekete

Emma Fekete, Beginner II

I look forward to my Hungarian class every Tuesday evening with great anticipation: they are so much fun that I am always amazed at how fast time flies, even at that late hour, even after a full day of work. Ildiko's mix of conversation coaching, games and grammar exercises are ideal, in my case, to refresh the vocabulary that I picked up during my three years spent in Budapest in the 1990s and cement my loose grammatical knowledge. Going to class in the Kossuth

House is a little, weekly time-travel to Hungary with all the books and antique Hungarian art on the walls. I'm not studying Hungarian with a specific goal in mind: I don't "need" it for my work or in my everyday life in DC, but I've always loved the challenge of learning such a beautiful and unique language. When I improve in Hungarian, I feel like I'm using some unknown corner of my brain and that pretty much anything is possible in life! 🍷

Hungarian Professional Happy Hours

Looking to meet up with Washington-based Hungarian professionals for a drink? Interested in Hungarian culture or in practicing your language skills? Keen on networking with Hungarophiles of all walks of life and expanding your circle of Central European friends? Mark your calendars for the Hungarian Happy Hour (HHH), which takes place every third Wednesday of the month at the Café Citron near Dupont Circle.

Started by HAF members and expatriate Hungarian professionals in 2004, HHH is still going strong, bringing together the "regulars"—those frequenting the event for years, and a steady flow of newcomers—students, interns, newly arrived professionals, or passers-through with a penchant for Hungary.

The theme of the informal get-together, of course, revolves around Hungary and Hungarian culture, but all are welcome and encouraged join the group. No need to speak Hungarian, the only requirements: an open-mind and a fix for a fun evening.

See the HungarianAmerica Foundation website for details and directions: www.hungarianamerica.com/events/hhh.asp 🍷



Tamas Hollo and Zoltan Feher sealing a business deal over a bottle of Hungarian wine