



Homecoming Forum 2008 Summary

The 6th annual Homecoming Forum co-organized by the HungarianAmerica Foundation (HAF) took place on April 19 at the Hungarian Embassy in Washington 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 regrouped 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.

Following on 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% responded in the affirmative.

Dr. Charles Wessner, Director of the Washington-based National Academy of Sciences focused on the comparative US 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 US 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 institution’s programs for encouraging the return of their US-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 – Semmelweis 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 US 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.

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 Nacsa, 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, 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.

by Aaron Imperiale