

Episode 24: Hungary

Summary

Zsuzsa tells Nick about her home country, Hungary. She talks about living under communism as a child, what Hungarians are like, and where to go in Hungary as a tourist.

Transcript

Nick: Today I'm talking once again with Zsuzsa and last time we talked about all of the different languages that she speaks. Uhh, and today we're going to look at her home country which is Hungary. And so, Zsuzsa, if you were talking about Hungary to somebody who didn't know much about it, how would you introduce the country?

Zsuzsa: Very interesting question. Umm, it's ... I would go from, because I'm a linguist, I would go from the linguistic point of view. It's a country in Central Europe, uhh, which is sort an island surrounded by countries that ... where totally different languages are spoken. It's a country which I think is a relatively¹ friendly and welcoming country. At the same time, quite pessimistic² and, umm, people have a different way of thinking than in the countries around it, in my opinion. Often people, uhh, put it into the same category as the Slavic countries around it. I think there is some truth in that of course, so from the economic perspective, yes probably, it's Central-Eastern Europe. However, culturally, we don't really have a lot to share with those, umm, countries. Uhh, well maybe in gastronomy, some dishes³ are, umm, similar and, uhh, otherwise, yeah, it's really a country that stands on its own in a way. Umm, yeah.

Nick: And so do you think the people, Hungarian people, are happy with that or proud of that, or they'd like a neighbour that they had more in common with?

Zsuzsa: I think they're proud of that. At the same time ... so if you ask an average Hungarian to describe Hungarians, it's either they say that, "We're very pessimistic and negative about everything," which I only experienced when I moved abroad⁴. I

¹ relatively: comparatively, compared to others

² pessimistic: a person who expects bad things (the opposite is *optimistic*)

³ dishes: food served in dishes (a dish is both the object that holds the food and the food itself)

⁴ abroad: overseas, in another country

didn't really realise when you live in that context that everything you say is so negative about everything, but it's true, if you look at it from the outside perspective, yes. Umm, on the other hand, umm, people are, yeah, proud to be Hungarian because they think it's cool and there's also this idea of people thinking, "Yeah, great, Hungarians of the world, there was always a Hungarian somewhere, uhh, when something important was invented," and, umm, in a way, yeah, people are proud of their country, I think.

Nick: And is it true that the Hungarians come from the Huns, the tribe that ravished⁵ the Roman Empire in the fifth century?

Zsuzsa: It's mixed, it's very, very mixed. So there are some German, there's quite a lot of German influence actually, so as my name also says - Hoffmann - so especially in the western part of Hungary, quite a lot of families have German origins. Some Slavic influence, obviously, because, I mean, geographically if you look at the countries around us, people mixed and also if you look at ... there's not such a thing as a typical Hungarian look. So if you want to characterise, I don't know, a typical Scandinavian, that's easy, a typical Italian - what they look like - that's very easy to define. A typical Hungarian - no. There's really everything. I mean some of them look almost, I'm not saying Asian but really from the East, clearly. Umm, some of us look Mediterranean, some of us look almost Scandinavian, so you can also see it when you look at the people.

Nick: And has that mixing of all of these different people, has that been harmonious⁶ or are there ever problems between the different people?

Zsuzsa: In history of course, now it's not an issue anymore, obviously. Umm, although there are some groups of the population which, yeah, umm, still face discrimination, sure. Uhh, but, umm, in history, sure, there were lots of, uhh, conflicts and, as you well know, the monarchy and before that the shape and the size of the countries changed a million times and, uhh, yeah. It's due to that mainly, in my opinion. I'm not a historian, so...

Nick: So for most of the second half of the twentieth century Hungary was in the eastern block, uhh, and you were telling me before that in your lifetime you didn't think that was a particularly hard form of communism or a difficult time for you.

Zsuzsa: No, I was born at the end of the 70s so, umm, in the 80s, yes, it was still officially part of the eastern block. However, it was much easier, let's say, or user-friendly⁷ - I don't like that word - but it was easier to live than, umm, in the 60s, let's

⁵ ravished: attacked and destroyed. It can also mean raped.

⁶ harmonious: without conflict, pleasant

⁷ user-friendly: easy to use or navigate through

say. So of course we didn't have access to lots of things, I didn't know what certain cartoons were that Western kids could already watch on television. We didn't have a telephone at that time, you had to wait for years to get a phone line and then you had to share your line with your neighbour and things like that. Or you had to sign up for a car and maybe in five years time and you were lucky and they'd call you, "Now we've got a car for you."

But there was a decent middle class, most people did have a car, most people did have a job, umm, a flat or a house, so the only thing, yeah, of course, we ... it was not easy to go abroad. So the first time I went to the West, let's say, was in '89 probably. We went to Austria and it was a very big deal to see Coke and chewing gum and things like that, but, umm, yeah, I mean, there's some nostalgia in it I think and now, people ... I mean, if you just look at a representative, if you look at Facebook, it's full of those nostalgic pictures, "Do you remember, if you grew up in the 80s, you must know this product, that product that nobody else knows," and, umm, we used to have lots of shows, for example, TV shows, which came from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Russia, I mean Soviet Union, umm, that we, now, we share with those cultures, that background that nobody else knows, so it's interesting in my opinion to have lived that and I'm very happy that I lived in that period.

Nick: OK, good. And do your parents remind⁸ you that life was more difficult for them when they were your age and things like that?

Zsuzsa: Not really, no, but maybe that's the way my parents are. No, not really. So, of course, I know stories that you went into a shop and there was not much to buy, but then again I think Hungary was not as bad as some other places, so there was always food to eat, there was always, yeah, there were lots of opportunities, actually, for entertainment, also, quite a rich cultural life. So, no, it's ... we don't have those stories going on in the family, "How difficult it was for me when I was a child," no.

Nick: And it seems like perhaps because of that, of the old Eastern block countries, Hungary is one of the most progressive or one of the ones that transitioned to, let's say, Western democracy, uhh, more easily than some of the others.

Zsuzsa: It started off really well.

Nick: OK.

Zsuzsa: I think, and then it's really not my duty to say what it's like now. Uhh, I'm not sure about, umm, numbers, but I think other countries such as Slovenia or the Czech Republic, they're doing better than us now. But I'm not really sure. It's true

⁸ remind: to cause someone to remember something (different from remember)

that we started off really quickly and, uhh, probably also for Hungarian society the transition was a bit too quick, actually. So suddenly there was everything and suddenly there ... a group of society formed which got really rich from one day to another and then that triggers⁹, yeah, this certain type of behaviour behind (it), which is not necessarily very positive. Umm, but I think people have calmed down¹⁰ in that respect now and, uhh, umm, so now it's sort of normal again.

Nick: Right, and so Budapest, the capital of Hungary, is quite a famous city and a lot of people from the West go there. Uhh, outside of Budapest, what are the things to see or the places to visit in Hungary?

Zsuzsa: It's true that it's a very centralised country. I always compare it to France because there's Paris and there's the rest, of course. It's a little bit like that so for tourists, definitely Budapest is the number one. I'm not from the capital, I'm from the second largest city, and if I say it's almost the size of Geneva, nobody knows it, so that shows how important the capital is because I think most people in Europe at least know where Budapest is. However, there are still some really nice landscapes. Hungary is a very flat country, there's a flatland in the east which is very popular with tourists. Because I come from that region I never understood why that was so interesting because in my opinion there's nothing to see there, but people love it apparently. There are some really nice spas and some thermal water which is good, and in the west we have a big lake which is great for tourism too.

Nick: Excellent, OK, thank you very much.

Zsuzsa: Thank you.

⁹ triggers: causes

¹⁰ calmed down: became quiet or normal again after a period of drama

Comprehension Questions

1. According to Zsuzsa, what is the main reason that Hungary is different from the countries around it?
2. Did Zsuzsa find it difficult growing up under communism? Why or why not?
3. According to Zsuzsa, has Hungary done well in its transition from communism to capitalism?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. I love Indian restaurants. There are so many great _____ that it's hard to know which one to choose!
2. If you live in Russia, Switzerland seems _____ warm, even though it can still be very cold.
3. The iPad is very _____. Even my mother knows how to use it!
4. Can you _____ me in the morning that I have to buy toothpaste?
5. European university students often study _____ through the Erasmus program.
6. In Belgium there is not always a _____ relationship between the French speakers and Flemish speakers.
7. At first he was really angry when I told him I wanted a divorce, but eventually he _____ and agreed that it was the best solution for both of us.
8. Once the last card is drawn from the deck, that _____ the end of the game.
9. She doesn't think his business plan will succeed. But that's what I expected from her as she's often quite _____.
10. Deforestation has _____ the habitat of many animals, leading to species extinction and other problems.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Have you been to Hungary or, if not, would you like to go? Have you been or would you go just to Budapest, or to other places as well?
2. Zsuzsa calls Hungary a pessimistic country. Would you characterise your own country as pessimistic, realistic or optimistic? Why?
3. Are you surprised that Zsuzsa said she was happy to have lived under communism? Why or why not?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. The Hungarian language is unrelated to the Slavic languages of the surrounding countries, so this makes Hungary an “island”, as Zsuzsa calls it.
2. She didn't find it too difficult because she said that the Hungarian version of communism was not as harsh as some other forms.
3. She said Hungary started off well in its transition to capitalism but then problems began to emerge.

Exercises

1. dishes
2. relatively
3. user-friendly
4. remind
5. abroad
6. harmonious
7. calmed down
8. triggers
9. pessimistic
10. ravished