



By Leen Laconte



INTERVIEW WITH IMRE TÖVISKÉS HUNGARY

People say he goes for different approaches and likes confusion from time to time, throwing all the pieces up in the air and putting them down in a new order.

That made Coyote curious to meet and talk with Imre Töviskés. Imre lives and works in Hajdúböszörmény, a small village close to Debrecen in Hungary. He is qualified in wireless communication, general management, design and social work. He has an impressive professional record taking in many different fields. In the field of training, he is a relative newcomer: his first training course was in 2000. The start of a Space Odyssey?



How did you get involved in international youth work?

It all started with a study visit to Finland in 1996. That experience really triggered my belief in the power and value of international work. I got very interested and joined an association for social workers, mainly working in the field of prevention. We organized our own courses as there was no-one in our area delivering what we needed. Somebody would buy a book, read it and the following week we organised our own training course on that topic.



What is youth work like in your region?

I think the Second Boston Tea Party is a good example. It was a one-year project - a collection of all kinds of short term courses for young people. At weekends, we organized a place for young people in Hajduboszormeny, my hometown, where they could enjoy their free time without drugs, smoking or alcohol. We bought a lot of family games. We invited speakers - human resources managers of successful local companies, for instance. They came in and gave courses for free. The topics were things like "How to write your CV" or "How to do a job interview". The activities were very successful and very useful in a country with high unemployment amongst young people. A lot of young people came to the "tea houses". You know, my hometown is 20 km from Debrecen. We call it a sleeping city. Most people go to Debrecen to work and have fun. It was quite amusing: normally young people go to Debrecen for entertainment but here we had youngsters from Debrecen coming to our activities. The tea houses were a perfect opportunity to develop my skills as a trainer as we did a lot of games and exercises for fun. Being with young people who do things really inspires me.



Do you see clarity in your professional past?

This is actually the first time I've collected my past together and put it in chronological order. You forced me into it. I was so surprised when I saw all those things about myself. I see a general line in my mind but it is hard to explain to people. I studied social policy, I sold kitchens, I designed furniture, I was a tourist guide, a social worker. I am a youth worker now. I guess I just enjoy learning about a lot of different aspects of life.

Being a tour guide gave me the opportunity to develop my entertaining skills. As an agent I had to know about building contacts. If you want to sell kitchens to people, you have to be able to assess their needs. My marketing experience taught me how to motivate people and how to build networks. You know, having experienced so many different fields, I truly believe that everything that involves working with people has basic similarities!



Your involvement in youth work came rather late, didn't it?

I was really shy and reserved as a child, very timid. I could not communicate with girls. I didn't have a girlfriend. That really frustrated me. I couldn't call myself clever but I wasn't stupid either. So I used my brain to cope with the frustration. Since people didn't want to communicate with me and I felt left out I started getting up to mischief. If anyone in my class had an idea, I pointed out all the things that were wrong with it and made them look silly. But that's a crap way to get a life. When I was 16, I decided to change. I learned how to talk and be pleasant from books like "How to make friends and influence people". That was the only way I had of learning at that point. But it let me see the problems and challenges I needed to work on.



The books were inspiring, but I realised I needed to put them into practice. I thought hitchhiking instead of taking the bus to school would be a good idea. So I hitchhiked every day. It was not easy at all standing at the roadside waiting for any lift I could get, but after a while I started to feel comfortable in strangers' cars. I started communicating with them.

On top of that I had a competition with myself. The trip to Debrecen takes 15 minutes. In order to get over my shyness I set myself the task of getting peoples' names, addresses and phone numbers – and, most important, a reason to call them – in those fifteen minutes. In the end, I had a box full of cards. I met so many fantastic people, like this guy with only one healthy arm and an arm with a hook made of steel. He was a professional driver, driving cars from Switzerland to Moscow and back. There were a million reasons why those drivers were where they were at that precise moment. There I was, sitting in their cars as they drove into town to work - to the hospital or to sell shoes or bras. Whatever. Sometimes it was tough, sometimes it was funny. I tried very hard to be friendly, to understand people, to discover what made them tick, why they did what they did.



Why do you think I got in touch with Imre Töviskés?

When you wrote me I was really surprised – why me? I've met a lot of trainers and youth workers who are really brilliant and very experienced. They started when they were 14 and were doing a really professional job when they were only 16. I've never done anything extraordinary. On the other hand, I rarely meet anyone with experience outside the training field - somebody who's been a business manager, a salesman or a technician. I've been a furniture designer or a salesman or a tour guide, what have you. For more than three and a half years I wore a suit and tie and sold kitchens to people. The prices went from 10,000€ to 30,000€. One day a friend of mine opened my eyes by asking what I thought it would be like after 20 years as a furniture designer. "Just ask somebody who's been in the job for 20 years" he told me. "You'll be looking at your future."

In furniture design you reach a certain level and then you can't go any further. It is like playing with Lego. There is a limit to the possibilities; somehow your creativity is preconstructed. I felt at the time I could be at the top of my trade in five years. But when I got to 50 there would be a lot of young designers with the same skills as me and my skills wouldn't mean anything. I want to be useful when I am old.

I feel there is a very logical line between my past as a salesman and the youth field. I did not want to do military service so I picked the other option, civilian service in a youth NGO. You could say I got into youth work by accident. Same for international work in fact: it is still a mystery to me who sent me the fax inviting me for an international exchange. It seemed to come out of the blue.

I consider myself an absolute beginner. I do not have a lot of knowledge, self-confidence or practical experience the way other trainers seem to. Hands-on experience is so important. Like in martial arts, you can find yourself in a critical situation and you have to react fast, almost intuitively. You don't have time to think about the basics. I admire people who have a kind of routine in training work. They are able to focus on the main things. Being forced to think about routine aspects of the job wastes vital seconds and minutes. That is why practical experience is important.



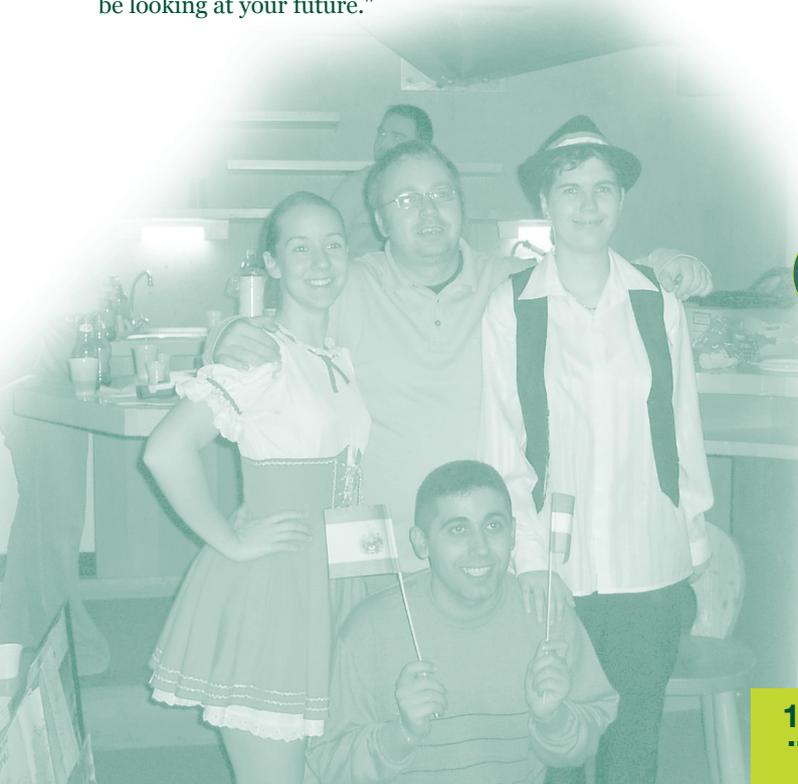
What is the meaning of training to you?

I can't give you a definition or a description of training. I did a drawing: the black box of training. The people going in are sad. They don't have any muscles or brain. When they come back out, they've got muscles, big brains and smiles. All outsiders see is participants playing around, using computers, doing bungee jumping, but they don't see the sense of it. They don't feel any of the excitement training can give. Training sometimes results in real change. Some participants say that their parents or girlfriends don't understand them any more because they have started talking about other things and having different dreams, different opinions about the world. This is not necessarily positive or negative, it is just change. If you open a door, you see what is on the other side. Nobody can alter that. If somebody shows you a window and opens it for you, you have a look and never forget the scene. It doesn't always make you happy, but in the long term it is always positive. That is why the participants in my drawing are smiling. They have become stronger, cleverer and wiser.



How are young people in Hungary doing nowadays?

There are a lot of question marks about their future. In general teachers and parents in Hungary have a very negative image of young people in Hungary. Once they are past 30, people seem to become terribly afraid. But young people are afraid too. They refuse to believe in the possibilities on offer. They expect to be cheated. Go on an exchange? No way – it's too good (ie too cheap) to be true.



Young people in Hungary don't believe they have a future. They do care, but they are sure the world will end when they are 25. It is important to show them they can do things and to give them some kind of awareness. There is a strong feeling that people don't belong any more. We have lost our Hungarian awareness, we have lost religious awareness. European awareness is maybe a way of fighting back, because it gives you the feeling that you are part of something. I see this as a powerful need: the need to belong, to be part of a larger community.

Trainers advocate freedom, living life as an individual able to do anything and travel anywhere, as part of the values we treasure: developing intercultural competence. But the young people I see nowadays are very afraid, they need things they can identify with. They need flags. If we do not respond to this, they will go after flags of a kind we do not approve of.



Should we start seeing young people as a minority? Is that useful?

There are less and less young people when we look at demographic statistics. Sociologists might kill me for this but I truly believe that young people in Hungary are developing a kind of new culture with new skills known to hardly anyone but them. Maybe they will turn out to be a new elite, a minority elite. Do they want to be part of society or just to stay out of sight, hacking their future away? Or will they be a strong minority with an impressive message to society? Youth workers tend to think young people are similar to them but that is not true. They think young people have the routine, time and self-organising skills to deal with the challenges in their lives. But there is also a structural problem here in Hungary. Young people have opportunities but they are still not aware of it. There is a huge lack of information. We lack organisations involved in EVS for example. One young volunteer called us from the other side of the country because he couldn't interest any of his local organisations. We lack background and experience. NGOs in Hungary don't have a lot of time to work, experiment, play, grow or learn. We are too busy staying alive. We started to use the Youth programme in 2000 and now in 2004 we are in the EU. In only 4 years... Not even a generation.

You can compare it with the appearance of computers everywhere. Loads of people used them but there was a permanent lack of teachers. Why? Because people earned so much money in IT that they didn't want to teach others. Only the second generation saw the necessity to teach people how to use computers.



What if I gave you all the money you wanted?

We have no trainers in Hungary, so I would spend it all on training new trainers, training youth workers and developing a plan. A good plan, like the White Paper, built on research, a master plan for Hungary. Part of the plan would be to develop connections between young people, who are turning into a minority, and the older generation.

Politically Hungary has a strong left and a strong right. The right lost the last elections and they use political scandal as a weapon. If they don't like somebody in a certain position, they just get rid of them. If they can't fire somebody they don't like, for example

the director of a cultural centre, they just close the centre. Young people are losing faith in democracy in Hungary and moving rightwards on the political spectrum. They are trying to find something concrete, even if it is aggressive. I would use your money to do something about that as well.



Can training make any impact and restore faith in democracy?

This is not an official opinion, it is just my understanding. We decided to live together in society and in order to run the social machine, we decided to pay tax so that the machine works properly. War, racism, aggression and anti-Semitism are bad; it is like putting too much heat into the machine. The machine will get slower and eventually break down. We will have to spend money repairing it. And not only that: war costs human lives. My grandparents told me how lucky I was to be living in a peace zone, and they were so right.

I don't want to endanger that, which is why I organize training about intercultural understanding. We need to teach people to live together because it makes the machine run better. It means we are not wasting time, life, energy, money or any other resource. Everything in the world is in very limited supply and we have to be careful. You know, it is like with stereotypes. They are not always a bad thing. If we didn't use stereotypes, we would have to think about 6 billion people in 6 billion different ways. Our brains would seize up.

When we train people, we have to believe it is really important because a drop of rain can become a huge storm. In biographies of famous people, you often find that a small moment changed their lives completely and for me a training course could be that kind of moment. A young girl could attend a training course some day, catch inspiration and become the first woman president of the European Union!

We are living in a material world so we have to be realistic. This place and this room cost money. My ticket to come here cost money. It is something that matters. At the same time we can pay doctors to make us feel better, but we can't buy health. We can pay people to be around us but we can't buy friendship or love, or faith, or truth. But even though outcomes are much more important than cost, it is EU taxpayers' money and we have to be careful with it.

Of course training is business of a kind as well, because some people make a living from it. And it is good to know we are not magicians. If we keep giving, giving, giving, we burn out. Fortunately you get a lot back; it is energising to feel you're doing something useful.

I do believe training is more effective than formal education. In formal education we give only formalized information, there is no place to develop skills, motivation, abilities. Formal education is always hard because the teacher has to give grades. You are always in a race. You can't really feel part of a group. In training we can give the same information as in formal education, but we do all the other things too. And we can use participants' knowledge and not only the formal knowledge owned by a teacher. That is really very important but also very complex. It is precisely that complexity that makes training really effective, because in our contemporary societies knowledge is really complex.





Is Europe making things any easier?

My opinion about Europe is under construction. I like the approach of the Council of Europe: from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from Portugal to Vladivostok. It is an interesting challenge for the future.

Hungarian youngsters consider Europe as "their place". Europe is cool. It offers lots of possibilities but it is also too huge to understand. They feel European. They feel culturally similar to other youngsters in Europe. I believe there are huge differences. Europe fortunately doesn't mean that local cultures have to be the same. It simply means having a common European culture. There is an important difference there.

People need to be part of something. And if I want to be part of something, I want to be part of something good, a quality club, a club that people respect. Telling people you are European sounds good. European institutions don't do enough to convince people that it is good to live in Europe, that it means something to be a European, that you can be proud of it.



What are your personal aims as a trainer?

My aims as a trainer are a bit of a dream, a very personal one. I train because I can develop. Maybe that's selfish, but I am addicted. It is not that I want to give participants something that will stay with them for the rest of their lives. I am not Gandhi. I am not so clever, not so wise, not so experienced. If you have a hammer you start to see everything as if it were a nail. So I am not trying to give participants a specific tool. I can show them where the tools are and how many different kinds of tools they can use. I can have a very useful influence, like a hunter showing his children how to use a gun. Then the children will always have something to eat.



What do you do when training wears you out?

I recharge my batteries with role-playing games! I like Dungeons and Dragons, and the atmosphere and heroics of the Middle Ages. I prefer to be the storyteller, just to invent the story again and influence the players and the way they develop their characters.



Some people in Europe would like to introduce a year's compulsory voluntary work for young people.

I don't like the word "compulsory". We don't control people's lives and when you turn this into a compulsory thing, it can come at the worst time in their lives. I truly believe that voluntary work is a tool for finding a connection and breaking down borders. Voluntary work makes you aware of your skills and capacities and is just as important as training and formal education.



Does Imre Töviskés mean anything?

The first Hungarian's king's son was called Imre. It means "clever prince". My family name is Töviskes and that means thorny, carrying thorns. I like my name, it is quite rare.



So, your real name is Clever Thorny Prince?

(Laughing) Well, my friends do call me Hedgehog. Coincidence?



Thanks very much, Imre.

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