

TO THINK OUTWARDS

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I was born in 1973 in a Hungarian town, close to the capital. We moved to the capital when I was seven. My parents benefited from being there. I have four younger brothers and, at that time, big families were provided with social housing. We lived in a densely populated neighbourhood in the downtown area. I am so sorry that my parents lost that flat! It was a golden age there for children! We hung around a lot with our classmates in the neighbourhood. That was a very pleasant part of my life. If I think about it from a social perspective, me and my brothers moved from there into a slum area at the outskirts. People are pushed out there, and children start running riot. You are in a desert, a big block of flats and nothing else. There is a watercourse, near a chemical factory. It smelt like shit; I wouldn't call it water. What are you doing there? Entertaining yourself. You know what kids are like. Madness. That's the coolest thing. It was indeed different from the downtown, that's what I feel if I look back. The people were different. It's the same as if you go to a rich or a working class area of the capital. It is the selection of the society. And we left the good place at that time. I was not yet a wild boy at the age of 14 but the direction I was heading in at that time was clear. My friends were the maddest kids and I too followed that path. Then I went to a vocational school to learn to become a painter. I enjoyed that. I finished at the age of 17 and I was working for a year but I stopped enjoying it. I already had some wild stuff going on and I confronted the law. I committed some small offences by breaking into cars, but I was lucky, I always came through without a scandal.

My mother managed to get me into the army immediately after I turned 18. I don't blame my parents for getting me on this pathway. My life circumstances were not such that I was predestined to cheat, steal and rob to make a living. My mother bought me clothes, my father gave me pocket money; I had everything. And, you see, it worked for my four brothers. It didn't work for me. If I think back and check all of my class mates from elementary school, there are a maximum of five who didn't have any involvement with the police. Imagine! I think it has to do with the social system in some way. I think there is a

fundamental flaw in the system that causes this. I mean, I don't want you to misunderstand me. I don't want to put responsibility on the system for leading me into crime. It would be false because people have a free will. If they want to go they go, if they want to stay they stay. But a youngster has an easily influenced character, which is not yet worked out or developed. He wants to belong to the gang and he wants to be respected for being tough. The system is part of the problem but I wouldn't consider it only as the sole cause, because it works like that among youngsters and it will work like that for a long time. But it is still strange that everybody that went off course lived in that environment. So many people went to juvenile prison from there. After I left the army, I immediately moved out from home to live with my girlfriend. I thought I am a grown up and I'll manage my own life. We moved to the downtown area and lived there for about three years, while I worked on housing reconstructions.

Maybe I was about twenty when I met those people who later influenced my life. At that time we committed various scams. We founded fake companies whose role was to buy various products via money transfer and then 'forget' to actually pay for them. We then sold the product to third parties. We tried to buy anything which could be bought via a money transfer arrangement. There were the three of us. Back in the day this method was quite widespread, and there were a number of groups who dealt in this trickery. Sadly, many companies were victims of this scam. I had to search and dig in the industry a bit to be seen as a competent person while scamming. I made shit loads of money then. With one action I earned as much as my father did in three months. Well we did this for quite a long time. We were the kings of the night, everywhere. We went to bars and drank too much - not just some shots, but a whole bottle of whisky or more; the waiters and the showgirls used to greet us in the coolest discos. Everybody was "eating out of our hands" and it was really good. How cool I am, I thought "how I rule - the world is mine!" I thought about an honest life and a normal job and so on... – bullshit – don't you know what life really is? – Ultimately, I got busted. In the end I was sentenced to three years and eight months, and I also had an ongoing case in Miskolc. The trials for my cases in Budapest were done separately. After six and a half months I was released, temporarily, and my reaction to this was that I'm never going to go back to jail ever again for sure! Now the twist came. On this point I really was in the wrong. At that time I should have gone back and got the jail over for good but I was

really in love and I thought if I don't escape from it, I'm going to die. I should have not done this. Now I see this from an entirely different perspective. I didn't go back to jail. I lived my life but it was quite hard since I was illegally at large. I did some work here and there, but I was paranoid I had fake papers and all. I lived like this for five years before they eventually caught me.

After five years of constantly being on the run one gets into such a nervous and physical state which is barely sufferable. I was only a shadow of myself. I tried to work in a pizzeria and then a bakery but I never stayed longer than a year because when I felt they started to know too much about me, I moved on. I had a girlfriend who did this throughout the whole period with me, from the beginning right through to when I returned from the army. She was with me throughout but we could not move on with our relationship. We wanted a family, but how in those circumstances? I was a wanted man. I could not legitimately marry her and establish a family.

Then it came to me that I would have to earn a lot of money, approximately 8-10 million Forints would do to start over. You can't really get this amount of money unless you take it from someone else – someone who owns it and you know about it. And I had information about somebody who had this amount. You can get the information if you know the right people. So what did I do? Well I stole a car in order to do it ... I knew the man drove a car to pay his taxes – over five million in cash in a case at a time. I'd never done that before so I had absolutely no experience since I'd always tried to gain the money by misleading and manipulating people, taking the money out of their pockets and I was successful at that. But this ...?

I bumped his car with the stolen one, and he got out from his car, then I shoved him and took the case which was on the seat. The attorney qualified this as a robbery. It was the strictest or highest category and I had to do ten years imprisonment, period. Only an hour passed before they caught me and they beat me up quite well. I wish I hadn't lived to experience this scene, but it was so. It happened and guess what my first thought was when the policemen took me out of the car: "I'll get ten years for this". At the court on the first instance I got another seven and a half years on top of the outstanding three years and eight

months. They excluded me from any possibility of conditional release. Finally with the other two instances I got ten years and nine months. I thought it's too much.

I could have experienced these possibilities otherwise; I could have decided differently, one way or another. Go into the jail, not go into the jail ... decide, what direction do you want to take, what are your goals ... and how serious are you? The possibility to choose the wrong way lies everywhere as does the opportunity to hide from yourself, to create a fictional world for yourself in order to ignore what's happening to you in the real one; many people choose this - a world which is so narrowed that it turns them into the living dead. They are capable of executing their physical needs, but besides this, they forget to really exist.

Maybe it was a turning point for me to say, well, no! Ok, I will spend a lot of time in prison, I won't be young when I get out because I'll spend my most important and productive years in jail; the period when one stabilizes the future. This will influence my whole life because I will never catch up with that ten years. Nevertheless, I'll do it as a man. This is a decision. Maybe these are banalities but it's not like that.

I got through these years at the beginning. I knew ten years was so much time it can crack anyone both mentally and physically. I meant to look after myself very carefully. I'd do anything to be a worthy man when I get out. For my family – I didn't want to burden them with extra duties because I had become a wreck, a junkie, or turned to alcohol. Then, I might go out and come back for something and have to do those things over again like before. My family packed and came and loved and accepted me. They absolutely did it and I could not look into the mirror again if I did this to them again. Not just with them, but I couldn't find peace with myself either. One must decide what he/she wants. Most people don't even think about what is that they want. I thought it over and I feel I made the right decision. There was a part in my life when I made loads of bad ones, only bad ones because it was easier.

What was very important was that I wanted a normal life for myself after jail. And I knew if I didn't behave normally in jail and start to rebuild my life after jail, I wouldn't be capable of

doing it. This helped me get through my time, that I knew I would have a normal life and everything will be ok.

In Balassagyarmat I met a former classmate of mine who had committed a bank robbery and was serving his fourteen years for it. We had a school class reunion - many of my mates were there. 'So, Sanyi, how many years do you have?' 'Ten years'. 'Come on, you'll fit in the team!' It was like this, 'Not too few, we'll accept you, come on!' And then I joined them, it was like a sub-system, and I really fitted in with that group. It was great luck that everything was set, you know. I didn't have to climb my way up the system, fight for my place, you just come, you have a spot, a good cell, a good team, you choose who you want to be with. You get information about the guards, who you have to fear, who is manageable. You instantly get the whole system as a package, which is a great advance and you don't have to experience it for months in order to know how to get along, to know how it all works. Actually, when I got into this core, I was among the most dangerous according to the security code, in the "four" category. Everybody, I knew was there; we were the bad guys in the prison.

So I was in that group but I realized I could not move forward from here. Not forward, rather inside. And they made their little hassles. I served ten years in prison with only one disciplinary sheet. Everyone knew me. I didn't have any blatant cases.

And then I realised that I had to really choose the right people around myself, that's a very important decision - and it doesn't matter if you're pals or not. If he cannot be on the same journey as you, you have to make these sacrifices. Very sorry, we can't go in the same direction. We helped each other if needed, helped each other to move on; but there were some who were not capable of helping or who could not be helped. Then I had to move on. I couldn't help much more because I never forgot that I'm always alone in prison. It doesn't matter who I have befriended, because I can only count on myself. It gives me a great steer. I can always measure my own limits, knowing the borders of what I'm capable of. You get to know this there, like a school of life thing - that you can realize your own borders and can learn how to act in various situations, and how to address them.

There were mobile phones in the prison. I had one and kept it all along during my sentence. They could never catch me with it though. I think they knew, but never acted on it. I didn't use it for bad reasons, like preparing a crime or to organize something; it helped me rather a lot; basically, to communicate with my family and it was worth anything to talk with them without being controlled, seen or overheard by the guards.

And then, after two years passed, I called my girlfriend who helped me while I was on the run; saying "Hi, I'm here". She asked me how I was and I replied that my trial was going to be on the 13th September. Ah, she replied: "on 24th September I'm getting married". "Oh", I said, "well, congratulations". And then, "I ... listen, it doesn't matter". I felt bad but we had a great conversation. And from then we talked every day. I went to the trial and she was there, waiting for me. She came. We were talking. I had my cuffs on, and she sneaked under them. These are seemingly small things but then, you must realize how bad it feels to be torn apart from your loved ones ... there is no such money that can substitute this! There are some who can live with this and can make the sacrifice for money; sacrifice freedom, sacrifice the family, family peace, their wife and children for financial endeavours but that's a stupid person. It is stupid because human relations count the most in my opinion; family, friends, and such. You deprive yourself of these by committing such crimes and for me this is the big restraint. This significance of this I realized at that very moment. I experienced this and I was very conscious that what I did was very wrong and that I had been on the wrong path for that past ten or more years.

I realized that this relationship was never to be. She was married, she gave birth to a child, and so on but from that point we kept on communicating. She always visited me, every two-three months at visiting time. She lived this double life. She never stopped visiting; we continued to communicate with each other for the rest of my sentence. Sometimes we fought.

I knew I could never expect anything of her and I was rather grateful that she came and didn't turn her back on me. She could have done that as well. Her marriage was totally her thing; I will always thank her for those hours every two to three months.

It's always the things outside the prison which are complicated. The inside – well, that's just

it. What happens? One day passes another; I work, I eat, I sleep. Nothing special. Things outside – those are hard, when, for instance, something happens at home. When you know you should be there; when someone is experiencing something bad and you know you should be there with that person and you can't. These things are very bad and rip you apart. You have to accept that you're here and they're there and life goes on without you. Things are going on without you as if you were dead. The only difference is – you can talk on the phone. But you have no influence on the outside. You really have to learn this - what to expect from others and what not to expect.

I knew for example how my mother suffered because I was in prison. I knew my girlfriend was really alone; the man she loved didn't stand by her. I know they had at least as hard a time as I did. I have to admit that. But they never showed me this; they only showed their support. Without the support of my family I could never have done anything. That's your base. That should be the base for you to deal with your troubles; a place you can go to anytime, whatever problem you have, and they will help. I had this. They didn't complain, rather encouraged, empowered me – every one of them. We didn't have to talk about this. I knew my mother had sleepless nights, my girlfriend cried on the phone on her way home from visits. There were signs which indicated these. But I owe a lot to them – that I didn't have to dwell on this; they dealt with it.

You have to realize at a point that “Hey man, nobody pointed a gun at you to go and do what you did. Wake up!” I interpreted it this way and it worked for me: “you deserve it thanks to yourself”. Don't mope around and don't do shit! Let's get on with things and things will turn out alright somehow! And it did.

As I survived one year after the other in prison, I absolutely focussed on the goal. I saw the next day in my mind and the day after and the day after. And it was all planned. I always had goals to achieve ... and I reached them. I fought for two years to acquire a workplace in the prison. And I got it. Two more years I fought to get a better job. I kept on sewing damn gloves until then! It got better and better. Finally I managed to get the best job: painter in the prison manufacturers. An artist came to the prison in 2007 to lead the renovation of the old chapel. I was chosen for managing the painting work of the prisoners. It was a hard, but

worthy job, I enjoyed it. We even did some fresco paintings, where the artist recognized that I have skilful hands. I called him after I was released and he helped me obtain some seasonal jobs out of the prison as well.

The best thing was getting to the chance to go on temporary release, because after that I could count in months instead of years. I thought it would be so wonderful to go home for Easter – and I did, then I had five days off in August. Then a kind of systematic order of temporary releases was established. Imprisonment became like a hard job from which I could go for a holiday. This was the greatest power - I didn't care what happened in the prison and how things went inside. After that I started to think outwards. How am I going to succeed with my girlfriend? And what about a job? What can I do? Listen, I was released on December 16th 2009 and I was employed on the 17th, by someone from the prison. He was released earlier. People say there is no friendship in prison - but the exception proves the rule, and we are still good friends. When I got out, he helped me out. I started to work with him as a gas repairman.

I opened up new roads; the old tracks didn't function anymore. Everything, except for the family, had collapsed; almost nothing remained from it. Absolutely, I can tell you that everybody disappeared around me. Only one friend followed me through this period of my life. He is a kind of person who walks with you until the end. I would get the maximum of a 'hello' on the street from the fellows with whom I once did everything together with. They all disappeared forever. In such an extremity you find out who is important, who needs you, who you need and who you don't. Things come pretty much apart. I am not angry with anyone; it is understandable that they turned away. This was my life that was unfolding and they did not need this story – there is nothing wrong with this. It is not a big deal. I tried to keep in touch for a while, writing letters, but I got no answer. Then I gave it up. But after release, when some of them came back I thought - if they have disappeared for ten years, why would I need them now?

In the same way that I could thank myself for getting imprisoned, I could also thank myself for reaching and realising all those things within the prison as well. If I haven't done things the way I did, those doors would not have opened to me. The luck factor was the prison

governor, who was ready to see that some people are able change. This was fortunate: being in the right place at the right time. There are prisons where the inmates don't even know the name of the director. Here - he knows all the 400 inmates by name! But, on the other hand, it was good for the prison that I was there, because I fixed up so many things that other people maybe couldn't. The director knew that he could count on this kid, because this kid "works damn hard for us". You have to deserve their trust. It is bloody difficult in a prison to make the personnel trust you without becoming a snitch but I think it is not impossible. Of course, you will always remain a prisoner for them but still, we are human beings and we can behave humanely towards each other.

It took ten years from my life but when I was released all those experiences lost their importance in a few days. It became zero - just as it is. The uniform, the line-up - who cares? The whole thing vanishes. Man is a strange machine. You remember only the positive experiences from that time. Yet I'd never go back. For a year? Not even for a day! Never.

What has changed compared with the self I was before being imprisoned? I became much sager. I do things more soberly. This 'bang my head against the wall' mentality disappeared. I consider situations three or four times before I make any decisions. That's it. And I have become relaxed. Ok, sometimes I am hot-tempered, but I was always like that. I have to tell you that this still happens. I am a grumpy, nervous person god damn it! But my basic nature is much calmer. And one, even more important thing I gained: persistency and determination. I can also be much happier about small things. Prison teaches you how to appreciate small things: you are so happy with two cookies. Today I don't eat bread but cookies! You learn to value anything. Tiny things.

If I would say I haven't learned anything there I would lie. This should be the meaning of prison: to teach you. I was taught in a sense because I was open to learn and mostly, I tried to train myself. I wanted this change to happen. I knew that I was on the wrong track and I wanted to move from that track. No correctional officers counselled me during the ten years: "let's talk about yourself!" or "How are you doing?" They don't have time for this. I never experienced such a trusting relationship with anyone but it was not necessary. You are

inside of a system and I think you have to find the solution as to how to become, or at least approach, the person you would like to be, or you should be, from inside yourself.

I helped many people in the prison, just by showing them an alternative: "Come on! Let's see, things can work like this". I illuminated their own opportunities: "Listen, you have chances in the prison, let's take them. You don't have to do anything else - just behave normally and complete your tasks, your work. This is a place where you can count on a result, although you have to wait a long time for it. And when your time comes, you could ask for a reward. The staff won't say go to hell – they will check to see what opportunities there are". Many of the fellows did it. I helped a few people to stay on the beaten track. I was a kind of pioneer. It was not usual that someone with such a long sentence is granted temporary release.

I am not sure that I could ever sit down face-to-face with the victim. I couldn't look at his eyes because I would be ashamed. Ok, I am accountable for myself. I am accountable to my family - because they love me. I am not accountable to him. He is a stranger. For him, whatever I do, however things turned out since then, it doesn't matter. I hurt him. On the other hand I didn't hurt him physically, but maybe these things influenced him physically. I mean in terms of his existence. Maybe his firm went bankrupt because of the money I took away. So I hurt him in this sense. I am not sure that I could account for him. It is just enough for me to reckon with myself.