

Interview with Attila Nemeti by the news of Hungarian Nation

From Being Homeless to Becoming a Millionaire

A Hungarian person who made the American dream come true!

Throughout the 1980s he was a swimmer in the Hungarian national team, shortly after, he left the country as a youth, and was later expelled from Japan. In the early '90s he was a homeless person in Los Angeles, who, by the millennial, became a millionaire in the United States. In 2006, Attila Néméti, as the trainer of the USA Kendo national team, defeated the all-time kendo world champion, Japanese team. Attila Néméti's book, *Stepping Through*, which sets out to describe the way of success, has been published in over 65 countries. Mr. Néméti planned to newly establish his life in Hungary, but after some months it became clear that Hungary still did not have the values that he was searching for.

- Let's start chronologically. Why have you left the country in 1984?

- In the communist era my plans and dreams seemed hopeless, especially considering my affection towards Japanese culture. Originally, I designed to immigrate to Japan, but was expelled within 6 months from the country. I was told that I should first immigrate to Austria, the capitalist country nearest of Hungary. In Austria I found social work as the helper of an engineer's handicapped daughter. This lasted until the government offered me to depart to Canada, Australia, South-Africa, or the USA. I chose the latter one. I spent 14 months in Seattle, but already suffered a cultural shock in the first weeks of my arrival.

- What is that?

- I did not speak English, and had very serious language boundaries. I could communicate like a 3 year old, and was surrounded by a totally unknown environment. A local Hungarian woman helped me proceed to the principle of the University of Washington. My priority was to learn English, but it turned out that \$ 1200 was the enrollment fee, and I only had 5 dollars in my pockets. This may sound amusing, but I began a sitting strike, and wasn't willing to leave the office of the principle. I spent 4 ½ hours in the office, while work at the university proceeded as usual, and people ran in-and-out of the office.

- Why weren't you forced out of the office?

- Maybe because I was sympathetic to the principal. When his workday came to an end and I still held my position, he offered me to study every day 4 hours at the university in exchange for 4 hours of daily work at the administration department. That's how it all started. I received a card which granted me a legal working status at the university, and shortly I became kitchen boy and night-watchman. Later, this backfired, and I was expelled from the school because I didn't have enough rest, and regularly fell asleep at work. Nonetheless, I still needed the money for my education, and became stable-boy, painter, and waiter.

- ...and homeless.

- Yes, but only for 9 months. From the money I saved I bought a Volkswagen, and drove south to Los Angeles. Local Hungarian immigrants invited me to stay at their place, and stole all my belongings, except the car. I spent 9 months living at the beach in the car, bathed in the sea, and ate the leftover at McDonald's, because I was totally broke.

- How did you bear the circumstances?

- At the morning I ran, and swam a mile in the sea. I tried to regard it as camping, and not as a constraint. I planned to travel to Las Vegas to be a croupier, and studied the croupier school for 6 months, at Redondo Beach. I had to pay for my education after I found a job.

- Did you make your luck in Las Vegas?

- No. I met with my present wife, who was born in Hong Kong but has been living for a long time in the US. We married, and decided that I would work as a swimming trainer at a pool in Los Angeles.

- How did you become a millionaire after being homeless?

- My method is very similar to the way I regard kendo. I draw most of my kendo coaching experience from my knowledge as a swimming coach. At the same time, I visited the best masters in Japan, who showed me the way they became successful. But it is very important that I built my own strategies, and never followed other peoples paths. I always find methods that are new, and try the stay ahead of people in my field.

- So, you are innovative in the way you keep ahead of your rivals? I mean that if you have a pancake store at lake Balaton where everyone only sells pancakes with jam, cottage- cheese, and cocoa powder, you would stand out of the businesses by selling pancakes with Bolognese casserole, spinach, and apple- vanilla?

- Yes, at least! It wouldn't make sense to do the same as everyone else, even if a franchise seems to be a convenient method. May it be anything that I set about; I try to do it in a unique way. My aim is to catch the attention of the potential customer. You should dare to be different, find new ways, and be admired by the people. I learned this experimental method from my swimming trainer József Nagy, back at Spartacus Club in Budapest, who generally experimented and analyzed his training methods on his swimmers. He constantly found new forms that could lead us to success. In fact, I became a Hungarian National Champion with his guidance. I followed the same methods when training the USA kendo national team and this is how we could defeat the Japanese. I started by examining how the motion of kendo practitioners evolved from the 17th century until nowadays. According to my findings, I speculated how this motion would evolve in the next 20 years. The Japanese team could train 8 hours a day, but we could not do so. So the question was, if we could not beat them with our efforts, how can we defeat them mentally, tactically, with new aspects in our training methods?

- You are really passionate about kendo. I guess kendo did not make you a millionaire...

- No. I found a market gap that was just about to evolve. In 1995 a revolution in information technology started, but 3 years earlier we already founded a company, Optical Communication Product, which produced transceivers that are attached to the ends of fiber-optic IT cables. We grew to a publicly traded company of 800 employees in no time.

- With whom did you found the company?

- Four families. To be specific, the founders were three engineers, my wife, and I. We did not count upon such a success, and even made an agreement with a Japanese firm who invested \$ 1 million into Optical Communication Product in exchange for 51 % of shares. Later, it turned out that we could grow without having to use any of the invested money. In 2002 we went public; in 2006 our company was acquired by Oplink, and we resigned.

- Why did you resign?

- After 15 years, we wanted to engage in something new. A lot of people think that company owners only enjoy their profits, but this is far from the truth. In reality, they work 24/7! It is a huge responsibility. On the other hand, if we would not have resigned at that time, we could have only done it step-by-step, within many years, because selling all your shares in a publicly traded company can have devastating effects. But the ownership change by Oplink gave us the opportunity to leave without the company being seriously affected.

- After resigning you lived as happy pensioners?

- We soon felt tired of our relieved lifestyle, and of traveling. We had to find some engagement, so we invested our money.

- Did you lose a lot when the housing bubble exploded in 2008?

- Actually, I withdraw my money from the stock market in time, but I had still great losses.

- If I am not mistaken, you traded on the stock market, and had gains similar to György Soros.

- No, this is not true! For some time I practiced with a non-existent, fictional trading account, until I learned the logic, and movements of the stock market. Without acquiring deep knowledge and lots of experience in trading stocks, I do not recommend it, but if you have enough practice, you have a chance to make profits. My highest daily profit is \$ 100 000, which is not even close to Soros's \$ 1 billion.

- How does luck affect success?

- This question is related to the chaos-theory. In my opinion, the more you work, the luckier you get. If you only sit around and wait for your luck, it won't arrive. I was a swimmer in my youth, and swimming is the most monotone sport ever: you only swim up and down the lanes and wish you were anywhere else than in the swimming pool but you just keep on swimming, without giving up.

- If we value the hardworking attitude in stoutness, it's ok, but I would question whether it is beneficial to continue investing energy into anything that clearly seems hopeless.

- Yes, this is totally true! If you make a mistake, you have to search for new ways to find a solution. You should always analyze the reason why things happen in life. My experience is that the world always forces you to adapt, and change. You should be like water, which is very hard, and is incompressible, but at the same time can take up any shape, and build or destroy its surroundings.

- And now we have arrived to the problem of intelligence, which is key to solving problems and adapting to new circumstances.

- But intelligence is not enough. The art of success is very complex. In fact, intelligence is in vain if you do not possess the relevant information.

- Or, for example, the person knows what to change, but fears to do so. He or she is afraid to make important decision.

- The difference is how we define fear and cowardliness. Firstly, we should point out that being cautious or being a coward is not the same thing. Frequently, when you're afraid of starting something new, it is because you don't have the relevant and necessary information. Fear of the unknown, and of taking risk is not cowardliness but caution. In these situations you have to collect the information which gives you strength and the energy to make the decision. If you have the goal, you should assign your tools to it. It is similar to building a house. First, you should make a plan, and then calculate the costs of the material, human resource etc., step-by-step. If we are uncertain whether or not to build a house, it can be because we do not have enough information about the specific type of house we would like to have, the costs, or the time and steps of construction. If these aspects are not fully elaborated and analyzed, it is normal that we do not dare to embark on such a project. This is true to every enterprise. Life is not a game, we have too much to lose.

- This is in accordance of a widespread Hungarian attitude, when people explain why they cannot succeed, or why they are unable to complete their assigned work.

- Yes, but no one really cares about this. No one would bother to know why you can't do something; even a 4 year old child can tell you that. It is important that you're able to tell how you will reach your goal. Every revolutionary achievement of civilization came into existence because someone imagined it, and according to his/her plan, realized it. It is obvious that nothing would have succeeded if people focused on telling how things malfunctioned.

- As long as I know, you planned to move back to Hungary, and even bought a beautiful house built by Makovecz in Buda, but finally you gave up these aspirations. What was the reason for this?

- I had lots of negative experiences. Firstly, I felt that in Hungary loyalty from the employee towards the employer is missing, and the working moral is really deplorable. Here the employees do not handle a company as if it were their own, in contrast to the US. Just for better understanding my point I'll tell you an example from a restaurant: a typical Hungarian waiter's goal is not to please the guests so that they

would later return with their friends. The aim of a Hungarian restaurant is to rip off the guests, and ask for as much money as possible. In Hungary no one sets out for long term business relations, good reputation, or for high quality standards. I can understand this because it roots in the country's history, which was one of constant plunder, but I cannot accept it.

- Is it possible that you simple met the wrong people?

- These were only my personal experiences. My second observation is that Hungarian's often try to impress with words and not with actions. Sometimes, they are proud of things they haven't even done yet. Furthermore, in Hungary, firms handle their clients as if they wouldn't need them to make profit. You can experience this on the public transport, healthcare, post office etc.; the customer is ill-treated. If any problem would occur at a US company, they would be really sorry, and treat your case as a high priority. In Hungary, you have to threaten people with suing them only to speak with a manager. The fourth reason I would not invest in Hungary is the overwhelming corruption in the private and public sectors. I would not like to take part in such a conduct.

- In the US, there's no corruption?

- Yes, there is, but the issue is far better.

- Maybe low wages gives reason for corruption in Hungary. Who is dissatisfied with his income would rather choose the risk of corruption than who has satisfactory wages.

- Righteousness and conscience are moral questions, and are not related to income. I know this, because I was also poor. Corruption is not a part of success.