



EUROPEAN ORGANISATION OF  
PRISON AND CORRECTIONAL SERVICES

## EUROPRIS INTERVIEW

EuroPris talks with

**Major General Tamás TÓTH, Dr.**



**EuroPris:** Could you tell us about your career path? Why have you chosen to work in the prison and correctional field?

I graduated at the Criminal Department of the Hungarian Law Enforcement College and then at the Faculty of Law at the ELTE University.

I started my work in the Police in 1994, at the age of 22, first as a detective then as chief detective. In 2003 I was appointed to the Budapest Police Headquarters where I led the Criminal Department of the 17<sup>th</sup> Police District and was Deputy Chief of Police at the same time. In 2005 I was appointed Chief of Police at the same place. Later on I led the 5<sup>th</sup> District Police and as of 1 June 2010 I worked as the Chief of Police of Budapest. I started my work at the Hungarian Prison Service in 2014 as Deputy Director General. Following the retirement of my predecessor, the Minister of Interior appointed me as Director General on 1 November 2016, almost a year ago.

Why have I chosen to work in the prison and correctional field? After 20 year at the police, I wanted new professional challenges. I started my job at the Hungarian Prison Service in times when structural change and reforms could be worked on. This way, I also got to know another important part of the justice system, as the penitentiary system is one of the most important pillars of public order and legal security. Over the two years that I spent as Deputy Director General, I had the chance to get an overall picture of the organization.

**How many Prison establishments do you oversee?**

The Hungarian Prison Service Headquarters oversees 29 prisons and 4 institutions. Two of the latter are medical institutions and two of them are educational institutions. We also have to mention here the twelve limited companies belonging to us as well.

### **How many prisoners are in prison at the moment in Hungary?**

According to the current data (27 October 2017), there are 17 840 prisoners in Hungary.

### **How many staff do you manage?**

According to the current data (October 2017), there are 9 012 people working for the Hungarian Prison Service. This means that 92% of the available positions are filled.

### **What are in your opinion the required attributes and qualifications of someone wanting to be a prison officer?**

The staff of the Hungarian Prison Service consists of law enforcement professionals, so the selection process and the requirements they have to meet are strict. No criminal record, secondary school diploma for non commissioned officers and university/college degree for commissioned officers are compulsory in order to work for us. There are also physical, medical and psychological tests for those who wish to join the staff of the Hungarian Prison Service. Considering the fact that one of the main tasks of the Prison Service is to reintegrate prisoners, it is especially important for our future colleagues to have pedagogical and empathic skills as well as high toleration for stress and good conflict solving abilities.

Nowadays the life-long career in the penitentiary field is getting more and more popular among young people, thanks to our effective reaching out to the young people who just begin their professional careers as well as the elderly jobseekers.

### **What is your opinion on the role of women in the European correctional field?**

There is little talk about women working in the correctional field, although they do an excellent job in the prisons. Every third employee at the Hungarian Prison Service is female, which means more than 3 000 people, precisely 3 173 people, based on today's data, out of 9 000.

Our female colleagues engage themselves in every field of the professional work at the Hungarian Prison Service, at the same time they excel in reintegration officer positions. Ladies usually have an extraordinary empathic skill and they are also good at communication. This is especially true in case of our colleagues who prove their abilities on a daily basis.

### **What is the biggest concern with regards to security in prisons in your country?**

The biggest problem currently is contraband in the prisons. Both the inmates and their relatives are very inventive. They try to use every opportunity to outsmart our controls. They use the most creative methods, so we have found forbidden objects in containers of shower gel, shaving foam, shoe sole, hair brush or even stuffed in sausage. My colleagues are constantly fighting in order to

prevent that these subjects enter the prisons. Last year they prevented 1 459 illegal mobile phones from entering the prisons during the controls, and this year we have already found more than 1 200.

**What do you consider to be the biggest achievements for your service in 2016-2017? What challenges you had to overcome?**

Fortunately we have performed numerous innovative initiatives and programs in the organizations that evoked world-wide interest and led to positive opinions about us. One of these initiatives is the supply system of the Hungarian Prison Service. With the support of the government, we have managed to create nearly totally self-supporting prisons and we have also managed to raise the level of inmate employment to nearly 100% in several fields. If we want to convert it into numbers: the level of employment is 91% at our 12 prison limited companies, with the involvement of nearly 12 000 inmates, leading to a yearly income of billions of forints that we spend on further developments and the establishment of new workplaces. These indicators lead to the fact that countries on the continent and even outside Europe are curious about our supply system. A few weeks ago a Chinese delegation carried out a visit in Hungary in order to gain experience in this field.

It is a legitimate expectation of the society that inmates should work. And the Hungarian Prison Service is ready to do what it takes to provide them with the most suitable work regarding their abilities, competences and attitude. We are also proud of the fact that thanks to our educational strategy more and more inmates receive school diplomas, from elementary school to vocational trainings and in some cases even university degrees. These are the key features of reintegration and maybe this is the best we can do for them.

The further development of the placement of the inmates was another challenge. We have introduced numerous measures in order to improve the circumstances of the prisoners who serve their punishment. In several prisons we opened neighboring cells into each other so that the location became more spacious and we also implemented measures to separate the restrooms from the cells. It is a long process but since 2010 we have established more than 1 600 new places in our prisons.

**What are the challenges for your service next year?**

We would like to reduce the occupancy level of our prisons below 100%. This goal will be achieved by establishing new places in already existing prisons and by building new prisons.

To the new prisons we recruit new colleagues. At the moment we educate and train the future staff members in three cities: Budapest, Szentendre and Nyíregyháza.

Regarding the future of the penitentiary field, in my opinion, we have to merge classic values with the achievements of the modern times. For me and for all the leaders at the Hungarian Prison service it means that the experience we have gathered so far, the results we have achieved and the

professional activities we have carried out need to be put in a modern, 21<sup>st</sup> century frame full of innovation. So, we are facing tasks that are serious challenges at the same time. Personally, I will do everything in order to fulfill these tasks at the highest possible standard that can be expected from us.

**In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges for the European prison and correctional services at the moment?**

In my opinion overcrowding, employment of the inmates on the widest possible spectrum and the possible radicalization of a part of the prisoners are the biggest challenges in Europe.

I am convinced that the professional answers for these phenomena and problems can be found together, that is why I think that international relations and exchange of good practices are of great importance. The Hungarian Prison Service is proud to have exceptional relationships and exchange programs. We have constant professional contact with the prison services of other European countries; especially the V4 countries (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary) and we have a mutual interest in the so called good practices. The individual prisons have autonomous partnerships too with their foreign partner institutions. In the past few years we have welcomed several delegations on ministerial and directorial level, we have also travelled abroad and participated in international conferences.

**What benefits do you see being linked to an organisation such as EuroPris?**

Our international relations are defined by the growth and development of our organization and in the easier adaptation of the international standards. The fact that we joined EuroPris served our goal to get to know and share professional protocols and to participate in the work of organizations that influence the future of the prison system and the development of the European legal framework. Our international relations work well on the level of the individual prisons too, which also leads to higher quality professional work. We also need to facilitate for our organization to get involved with international projects that support the widening of the professional horizon of our staff.

**Do your prisons engage with NGO's / Charities?**

According to the legal regulations we have a constant and effective cooperation with our fellow law enforcement organizations, religious organizations and other cooperating partners. The Hungarian Prison Service Headquarters cooperates with around 20, and the organization as a whole with more than 100 charities. Some of these provide spiritual help for the inmates, some of them help reintegration processes and some of them support the inmates to exercise their human rights.

**What are the most important personal satisfactions and dissatisfactions connected with your occupation? What part of this job do you personally find most satisfying? Most challenging? What do you like and not like about working in the correctional field?**

Fortunately, I have many things to be satisfied with. If I could mention only one, it would be the establishment of the self-supporting prisons; in my opinion, this is the field where we had the biggest achievement in the past years. The clothes of the inmates are completely produced by our limited companies; they also produce agricultural products that are essential for internal supply. They produce a wide range of products from baked goods and meat to wooden products and furniture as well as uniforms, protective shoes, paper and sanitary products. The grain and vegetables produced by the limited companies are also sold on the free market.

When I was appointed, I set a goal for myself that proved to be the biggest challenge: I wanted our organization to be better known and recognized. I think openness is important when it comes to applying 21<sup>st</sup> century methods both in the management and on the level of implementation. I am convinced that we perform an important crime-prevention role too, although this is not the first thing that comes into one's mind while talking about prison system. We have the means to give tools to the criminals with which they have the chance to alter their attitudes if they want and we would like to show this to the society – in order to show people the results of our work. In my opinion we can call it a result when the inmates graduate from high school, learn a new vocation and create value with their work in the prison and following their release they can work in the free world with the help of their new profession and their professional experience gained in the prison – that is what I call the beauty of the penitentiary-related work.

What I don't like about our work is the occurrence of extraordinary events, unfortunately there is example for this, too.

**If you could be remembered for one thing whilst being in charge what would it be?**

As I have mentioned before, I would like to take down the walls that are between the society and the prison. The whole society has to be familiar with the work and the efforts that go on behind the walls both on the side of my colleagues and the inmates. I would be happy if I were this reformer.