



ANNA HUYSSSE-GAYTANDJIEVA: WE HAVE SUCH A DEEP NEED TO BELONG AND FOR A SOCIAL CONNECTION

Anna left her country, Bulgaria, in 1999 and decided to start a new life and develop her career in the Netherlands. She has achieved a lot of things in her life but prefers to define success which is not based on her professional achievement but how happy and satisfied she is with her life. Anna sees success as loving the people in her life (family, friends, colleagues) and the deep contact she has with them. She is proud of her trans-cultural step-family and grateful for the work opportunities that has been offered to her in the Netherlands, which helped her to learn and grow. Anna is glad that she has followed her heart and dared to start with her own psychological practice in the Netherlands. To a great extent what helped her to build her life as a fulfilling one is that she embraced some things from the Dutch culture whilst keeping her Bulgarian identity intact.

By Lela Struga / Issue No. 3 / June 6, 2014

MIGRANT WOMAN[®]

You are a woman that decided to emigrate in search of another meaning of life. At this point in time, what would be your definition of "being a migrant"?

From an early age I had to move from one place to another and to adapt to the changes. Those experiences together with my natural curiosity formed me as a traveller. I look upon human migration in the same way as an animal migration: as an adaptive reaction, vital for the systems. Migration reminds us that the world's environments are interconnected. It brings us opportunities to learn from each other and to recognise what we have in common – our common human nature.

What did you find different in the Netherlands from your land of origin?

Dutch and Bulgarian cultures are quite different. I will mention just some dimensions of which, in my opinion, the two cultures differ. Coming from a collectivistic society, the Dutch culture was initially stressful for me, with its very individualistic features, where people are expected to take care only of themselves and their direct family members. From the other side, the Netherlands has soft, feminine characteristics and stands for cooperation and caring for those in an unfavourable position. Whereas Bulgaria has much more masculine features and is driven by competition and achievement. Disliking the strong hierarchical organisational structure in Bulgaria, it has been such a pleasure to work and live in a climate of equality in the Netherlands. Even though I want to sound optimistic and less critical, like most Dutch people, I still prefer the Bulgarian expressiveness (emotionality, vivid talk, more gestures, etc.) food, and the weather. J

What are your feelings when you think of your homeland and the old memories?

I love Bulgaria and I am proud that I am Bulgarian. Bulgaria is the land of my parents, grandparents, friends, where I was born, and where I spent big part of my life (until the age of 29). And I will always have the need to go back to my roots, to Bulgaria, to re-charge. In my memories, in my heart, my homeland has a special place that I will always cherish.

How did you build your career in your new country?

I was offered a scholarship in the Netherlands. The post-academic study was the reason for me to come to Maastricht. This opened opportunities and was the beginning of my academic career. I worked as a researcher, a docent, and later did my PhD at Maastricht University.

Although I am enjoying the academic field, I have missed the contact with people and my psychotherapy practice. After a lot of concerns (being a foreigner, Dutch is not my mother tongue, a belief that I may be less culturally sensitive, etc.) I decided to give it a try and started with my own psychological practice. My initial thoughts were that my niche clients would be foreigners. To my big surprise and pleasure, most of my clients were and are Dutch. It probably sounds too easy and sweet

After so many years since emigrating, where do you feel your home country is?

My home is where my family is and I need to have Bulgaria in my life. Wherever we are going to live, I will create my mother country in our home – Bulgarian art, music, pictures, food, a place to pray, and small precious pieces from my past.

Who has supported you to achieve your goals?



I am thankful to my husband, and to my children, who are a big part of my life. A huge support to me was Wim Groot, the professor I worked with on my Masters thesis, who later gave me an opportunity to work at the University. He further supported me not just as a PhD supervisor, but also during the life storms which hit me during these years. I am so grateful for the friendship of some close people and the unconditional love of my Bulgarian relatives. I am thankful to myself for where I am today. Particularly, for my faith, hard work, persistence, not giving up, and being able to recognise the wonderful people I have met on the road.

What dreams have you not yet achieved?

I have a dream to mean something for Bulgaria, my mother country, and finding a way to reach more people.

You are a career woman, a mother, and a wife – how do you balance your life?

My family is a number one priority for me. It has not always been easy to get a balance, certainly not when the children were little. When looking at the whole period of the 14 years that I have been in the Netherlands, there has been a certain balance in my life. Though I had periods when I was out of balance, even without recognising that, before becoming completely exhausted or sick. There are some tools that I use to help me live consciously. I would name some: Once in a while I will draw the balance model (used by Positive Psychotherapy), including body, contact, achievement and future areas, to see how I am splitting my energy between those areas. Additionally, taking time to be still, on a daily basis, is essential for me. Using compassionate mind exercises in difficult moments, is what I perceive to be the biggest gift to my brain and the people around me.

You work as psychotherapist – what is your approach with migrant women clients?

I do not have one approach to use with a client, independently of whether this is a migrant or not. Every human being is unique, as is his/her experience or his/her problem. Although there are certain things that I do pay more attention to when working with migrant clients. When I have a feeling that I understand what the migrant client is communicating, I proceed with further questioning and listening, and to listen using all of my senses. Of course this is an essential part of psychotherapy in general. Yet, in my opinion, by working with migrants, it is even more important to not easily assume that we understand. I am also playing a role in their understanding of the Dutch culture, helping them to find not just the differences but also the similarities with their own culture. I am often supporting the migrant clients with advice for very practical issues. Storytelling, humour, and helping to self-help, are part of our working together.

What advice and wisdom would you like to share with readers of Migrant Woman?

Being different is not always easy. We have such a deep need to belong and for a social connection. While keeping yourself intact (and not giving up your identity), look at the native culture in the host country for what would you like to have in common, and integrate that within yourself. Make it a unique mix which will create a niche in the society for you.

Who is Anna?

Anna Huyse-Gaytandjieva was born in in Bulgaria. She graduated at the Medical University, Varna then specialised in psychotherapy and worked actively for the establishment of the Positive Psychotherapy Association in Bulgaria. Anna holds a

European Certificate for Psychotherapy. In 1999, Anna was offered a scholarship for her post-graduate study in Public Health at Maastricht University, the Netherlands. After successfully finishing this program, she worked as a researcher at the Department of Health Organisation, Policy and Economics (BEOZ), Maastricht University. At the same faculty, Anna did her PhD and combined this with educational tasks. In 2007 Anna opened her own Psychological practice in the Maastricht area. During the period 2011-2013 Anna Huyse-Gaytandjieva was elected and worked as a member of the Board of Directors of the World Organisation of Positive Psychotherapy, Wiesbaden, Germany, and at the NGVH, a professional organisation for psychotherapy.