



Beyond Erasmus

Stories From Outside The Box

A Legacy Project Involving
Youth Work Practitioners
and Trainers from Erasmus+

3
Volume



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‘The aspiration behind this project was to capture stories that reveals the ‘ah ha’, the ‘I never knew that’ or the ‘I only discovered this after they were gone’ moments. It was about capturing stories that demonstrate members of the wider Erasmus Youth Work and Training family are more than just Youth Workers and Trainers, Policy Makers and Strategists, Mentors and Coaches. It was an attempt to shine a light on their more humane side, a side that gets little or no attention, a side that offers a glimpse of people we know but don’t really know.’

Introduction

Welcome to the third and final (at least for now) volume of **Beyond Erasmus, Stories from Outside The Box**. If you haven’t had a chance to check out the first two volumes, then you can access **Volume 1** here:

<https://www.docdroid.com/GJzbFmt/beyond-erasmus-stories-from-outside-the-box-vol-1-final-ii-pdf>

and **Volume 2** here:

<https://www.docdroid.com/YLSLPnx/beyond-erasmus-stories-out-of-the-box-vol-2-final-pdf>

The response to both Volumes 1 and 2 has been extremely positive and further demonstrates not only the interest in such an initiative but also the appetite for discovering a little more about colleagues from the Erasmus+ field, at least within the non-formal education sector.

To every person who has contributed to all three volumes, once again, I want to offer my heartfelt thanks. There was, of course, no obligation and certainly no compulsory element to this. The nature of this project is entirely voluntary, but without their willingness, support, co-operation, commitment, and questions, it does not work, and ultimately there would be no stories. Everyone who took part gave of themselves fully, but of course they also needed a little reassuring about what they were being asked to do.

The journey has been an interesting and intriguing one, to say the least. From curiosity and fear about what people were being asked to do to a belief among some that they did not have a story worthy of mention or did not have a story outside of Erasmus, it has been a journey that has proved enlightening, fascinating, humorous, humbling, and

immensely enjoyable. I am delighted to have shared the journey with so many and heard many fascinating stories.

As Volume 1 ‘hit the shelves’ (so to speak), it not only offered the opportunity for readers to see how it might look, but the stories did provide reassurance among those who were perhaps a little reticent about the ‘step into the unknown’ that they were being invited (and encouraged) to take on. The realisation that no-one was baring their soul or leaving themselves vulnerable or open to judgement became clearer.

Moreso, the intentions behind the initiative, which were to create an archive of non-work and non-Erasmus stories, which is, of course, the common ground that all of us share or have shared, also became clearer.

Stories were only ever designed to be what people wanted to share, but equally, they would be the source of revelation, discovery, and surprise. As I have often said during conversations, they would provide the ‘a-ha,’ moment, the ‘I never knew that’ moment, or the ‘how did I not know that’ moment. They are the kinds of discoveries that tend to only reveal themselves upon retirement or at a funeral or cremation, and by then, of course, we have missed the chance to share in the moment.

Over the course of the journey, it became clear how reluctant contributors were to use labels. Everyone was used to being asked to provide a 15–20-word description that defined them or that they identified with. This provided a real mix, from those providing twice as many words to less than half. And then there were those who were reluctant to label themselves in any way, even when it was obvious to me that they were perhaps a parent, a partner, a son or daughter, and so on.

But then I had to remind myself, that things that seem obvious to me might not necessarily be obvious to others, or even if they are, they might not be how they see themselves primarily. And this is also part of the beauty of this work in that it reflects great diversity among those that have contributed: diversity of perception, diversity of interpretation, diversity of understanding, diversity of what is important for them, and diversity of how they want to be viewed.

Knowing that their own descriptions would be viewed publicly caused them to pause and reflect on what that meant. I also have the sense that it's not so often that people are asked to define themselves beyond perhaps a CV or applying for work.

Equally, it's also understandable that youth work practitioners are not comfortable labelling anything, let alone people, because they know that the nature of youth work is not inclined to do so. When youth work practitioners and non-formal educators are asked to define or identify anything—least of all themselves—it challenges them to reflect upon how they are indeed perceived or what makes them the person they are. This is not so easy to do, but it does create space for reflection. And that, of course, is not necessarily a bad thing.

The motivation for this initiative owes itself in large part to the idea that we are so often focused on or preoccupied by the design, development, and delivery of programmes, projects, and practices that we make very little time for the individuals that make up the Erasmus Youth Work collective.

Many practitioners have 'grown up' together in Erasmus, and if you were to search on the internet for their names, you would find many references to their work, their partnerships, their ideas, their 'product', and how and what they do to advance youth work and non-formal education across Europe, but rarely anything

else. This is not to suggest people should 'reveal' their life on the internet—they have social media for that—but more so that we don't really have meaningful opportunities to find out about people we often work closely with as well as often very intensively with.

Building the story of youth work and non-formal education is, of course, admirable and necessary. Many of those who are or have been central to it—whether they write it, help mould it, tell it, collate, and collect it, or monitor or evaluate it—know very little about individuals at a more human and personal level. And unless we make a conscious decision to document non-work and non-Erasmus stories—the stories that bring life and reveal the more humane side of those individuals—then there is a risk that we lose them forever.

And when people move on to other things, be that career change, retirement, or, sadly, death—as we have already discovered within the Erasmus family in very recent times—we miss the opportunity to capture hidden and unknown moments, at least those moments unknown to most of us.

I have no doubt that practitioners among the wider Erasmus non-formal collective do indeed know some of their colleagues at a more personal level and that this has been built up over time, but such is the nature of the intensive, time-bound, and outcomes-focused work, that time is something that is rarely afforded to us. And unless you make a point of consciously making and spending time with colleagues to discover a little more about them, it is something that is unlikely to change.

This initiative has managed to capture twenty-five stories from practitioners within the Erasmus+ Youth Work collective. Eighteen males and seven females representing 18 countries across both Europe and the Euro-Med region have offered stories. This has included those heavily involved and those no

longer involved; those involved in front-line delivery and those in policy formulation; those working freelance; and those working for National Agencies and other similar bodies.

Stories have been diverse, to say the least—everything from DJs, mathematicians, and linguists to a horse rider, a bomb disposal expert, and a TV star! If this is merely a taste, imagine what the rest of the field is like! Imagine what stories might await us if we were to work collectively and consciously to capture them as part of a more strategic approach, I think we would have an incredible archive that would honour and acknowledge those individuals who have brought so much to this family.

In closing, and as I have said time and again, I am truly honoured and humbled by those that have shared space with me or have 'put pen to paper' and submitted their story. I am grateful for their willingness to take a risk, jump in, and make the time to not only support the process but to share, to be curious, to be receptive, and to give of themselves freely and honestly.

No conversation ever lasted less than one hour, some stretching to almost two, and no matter how long the conversation lasted, it was worth every moment!

The final word of thanks goes to Graphic Artist, Michael Robertson, whose talent is not limited to taking an idea and creating something beautiful, but also includes qualities of patience, sensitivity, humility, commitment, and perseverance. Without contributors, there are no stories, but without Michael, their stories do not come to life!

Fergal Barr

March 2024

Project Overview

Rationale

Starting out as The Erasmus+ Human Legacy Project, this voluntary initiative was designed to capture non-work stories from Youth Work practitioners and Trainers connected by their involvement in Erasmus+ over the last number of years, and in some cases, decades.

The aspiration behind this project was to capture stories that reveals the 'ah ha', the 'I never knew that' or the 'I only discovered this after they were gone' moments. It was about capturing stories that demonstrate members of the wider Erasmus Youth Work and Training family are more than just Youth Workers and Trainers, Policy Makers and Strategists, Mentors and Coaches. It was an attempt to shine a light on their more humane side, a side that gets little or no attention, a side that offers a glimpse of people we know but don't really know.

Context

The fragility of life is not a conversation we tend to have too often. It is without doubt a sensitive subject, and by no means easy to take about. Loss can have a devastating impact on even the most resilient among us. The nature of loss and the circumstances that surround us can have a profound effect leaving us feeling deeply wounded.

Loss is not something that the Erasmus+ collective—at least among the youth work and training fraternity—experiences or shares collectively. Notwithstanding the loss of colleagues in our own respective work settings, the Erasmus+ family has been fortunate that many colleagues have had the opportunity to work and grow together over a sustained period, building many strong relationships working on multiple projects.

We often become accustomed to seeing colleagues at annual and bi-annual gatherings and working together on a range of initiatives often led through innovation, creativity, and imagination or in response to policy decisions.

The fragility of life was highlighted in 2023 with the untimely passing of Leo Kaserer, an experienced and committed practitioner from within the Erasmus family. Leo was well liked, respected, and very well thought of at both a personal and professional level, and his passing caused some of us to reflect on what our contributions or legacy might mean but more than that, how we are known to our colleagues, beyond that role we fulfil when working on projects, programmes, policies, and strategies.

This initiative was not about necessarily paying tribute to Leo—there are many more much better placed to do so—but if anything, perhaps his passing can be a catalyst for not only acknowledging that all life is fragile but that the many connections built up through involvement in Erasmus will inevitably end at some point.

The fragility of life was echoed at the beginning of December 2023 when Martin Kimber passed away suddenly. Martin had been involved in Erasmus for a period, primarily within the UK, but to those that knew him and had worked alongside him, they had only good things to say about him. His passing came as a shock to all those that knew him. They looked upon him with fondness and very much appreciated him in a personal and professional capacity.

In the year that this work was initiated, Erasmus has lost two members of 'the family' and whilst not known to all, they were known to many.

Perhaps we can begin to think about not only the impact this has by looking at ways in which we not only capture legacy but in doing so make a solid commitment to capturing that legacy; a legacy that focuses much more on the individuals that make up the collective rather than the numerous policies, strategies, models, and initiatives that tend to bind us. This is not a criticism of any of those initiatives but that we are simply much more than these alone.

Policies, strategies, models, and initiatives will of course evolve, and inevitably are replaced over time, but when members of the Erasmus family move on or pass away, their legacy really only survives in the impressions and memories of others unless we commit to documenting them.

This project was not in receipt of any funding and was delivered entirely, on a voluntary basis, and was created in recognition of two key elements:

Project Aims

- (i) the need to create an enriching archive full of stories about the person behind the practitioner before they are lost through the mists of time and**
- (ii) recognition that life is fragile and in any given moment, we might lose that person through illness, natural circumstances, or suddenly and unexpectedly.**

Who was involved?

A small working group consisting of Peter Hofmann (Austria), Jo Claeys (Portugal), Simona Molari (Italy) and Fergal Barr (Northern Ireland) was established at the outset to set in motion the process of beginning to capture non-(Erasmus) work stories from colleagues within the wider 'Erasmus Youth Work family.'

What the stories should or might look like?

The emphasis on each story was to capture and reveal the person's more humane side, sides that we might never have occasion to see due to the normal Erasmus 'demands,' i.e., time-bound, intensive, outcome-focused, and so on. It might be a story that we might only learn about them after their passing, or after they retire.

They might have played in a band, published a book, starred in a film, been a fabulous artist, changed the law, climbed Everest, saved a life and we might never know this, which of course would be a shame, but it's the sense of discovery that this project wants to nurture, that each person is more than merely the practitioner we know in the working context, that context being essentially Erasmus.

We know a lot about each other in terms of the projects that practitioners from the Erasmus Youth Work Family co-ordinate, or perhaps lead on, initiate, and develop but not a lot about the non-work side, and this project was designed to capture that.

Colleagues were approached to share a story - something that no-one really knows or at least very few beyond the Erasmus 'bubble' do.

Practicalities

Stories were captured in two ways— documented through informal conversation, or stories were submitted. Any stories documented were returned for final approval with any amendments at the request of practitioners implemented.

It was always designed that each story should be no more than 1-2 pages long, or approximately between 500 and 1500 words (4000 – 6000 characters including spaces). It was to be a non-work story, something that individuals were willing to share and at no point should ever compromise anyone or any other colleagues.

Participants were also asked to submit a black and white head and shoulders photo of themselves without any props as such, e.g., hats, sunglasses, etc, nor should the photo be of a 'professional nature' but rather convey the essence of each person, a truer reflection of them without any filters as it were.

The photo would give a sense of the 'true' individual, revealing their humane side, in a way that we have not seen or might not expect, or just with a sense of the true self.

The idea was to collate all the stories into a pdf file with perhaps hard copies following in due course. Due to costs, all volumes are only (currently) available in pdf format.

“This was simply unfair to me, and my ‘peaceful protest’ was throwing my chair across the classroom (yes, I did that) and articulating my opposition to the decision. As you can imagine, I was ‘invited’ to visit the Director of the school, and of course I made my feelings clear. That year, I all but ‘left’ high school.”

Gisele Everard



Gisele Everard

World Citizen, Proud Mother, Friend, Facilitator, Synergies-Seeker, Curious, Animal (especially cats), Celtic Music, Middle East and History Documentaries Lover, Therapist and Systemic Constellations Facilitator - STORY COLLECTOR.

It's not surprising that I ended up in Youth Work although that's not really what my story is about. But it's difficult not to reference it to help give my journey a little context. My story continues; it is ongoing, and some of the key events in my life have brought me to where I am and who I am now.

I have been on a wonderful journey. It is far from over, but I have been evolving over the years, laying down new markers and adding new pieces to the jigsaw that make up my identity, which includes but is not limited to that which most people connect me with, i.e., youth work.

I became involved in youth work when I was around 11 or 12 years of age. I was living in a village south of Brussels and was involved in the scouting movement, but I must confess that I did not like being told what to do in a 'that's the way it is' manner. That might be a little surprise to some because when you're working with structures like SALTO, most will assume you are following a particular direction of travel.

In the Scouts, as most of you will know, you can collect 'merit badges' for lots of things. I was getting some, but the other side of that was the injustice of others not getting any. I spent two to three years with the Girl Guides. But what I saw as the injustice of others not getting any medals fired some of the passion for equity that I carry with me today.

In most of the schools I went to (and went through), the classes had a representative. I had that role for several years while in France, and my tasks were to report situations that called for intervention and to handle conflicts between teachers and pupils. I did this between the ages of 14 and 17. And when I say handling, I mean to act a little like a mediator or moderator between two conflicting parties.

One of the worst events I witnessed and felt compelled to act upon was when our German teacher decided to pass only one-third of the class because some had missed the final exam for different reasons, and the decision was to effectively punish them by failing them without asking why they could not make it. Never mind all the work they had put in throughout the year; they missed the exam, so let's just fail them was the message!

This was simply unfair to me, and my 'peaceful protest' was throwing my chair across the classroom (yes, I did that) and articulating my opposition to the decision. As you can imagine, I was 'invited' to visit the Director of the school, and of course I made my feelings clear. That year, I all but 'left' high school.

I was anyway only going to the classes that were engaging, participatory, and where dialogue was not only possible but also encouraged. This is probably when my 'learning by doing' part of the journey started. Yes, I know what you might be thinking—Gisele throwing a chair across the classroom! I know it's not what anyone would normally associate with me (and nothing to be proud of), but the passion to fight injustice was an innate one, part of my DNA, if you like, one layer of my identity.

In France, around this time, there was a big demonstration, against the Minister of Education. Our school was doing fine, but we protested in solidarity. The lack of funding was not enough for good salaries, and teachers' conditions were far from ideal, therefore impacting the students. I helped organise the protest, and somewhere someone saw me as an 'activist' and that I opposed injustice, or at least, acted in solidarity.

I was invited to join the Young Socialists, but I refused. I'm not a political party person; I would almost describe myself as a 'Socialist without a Party!' I don't like party politics, but I am political. I think you must be. I don't think it's possible to expect change and yet stand by and wait for it to happen.

Of course, having a passion for fighting injustice and creating change does not pay the bills. People might be surprised to learn that I worked in a clothes shop when I came back to Belgium from France. I also worked in a hotel and a Brazilian restaurant, and even learned samba in the process.

While back in Belgium, I also worked for the Belgian National Opera. I was looking after 'the wardrobe' in each of the shows whilst studying at the Theatre Academy, which in turn helped channel my energy into youth work. Many of those we know from youth work have been involved in theatre, music, and similar activities, and I was no different. I performed on stage—a declamation—which is like a monologue, but I was also involved in two or three other productions, and I also organised two other productions as both producer and director.

These were the usual kind of stories, i.e., good against bad—'West Side Story in Brussels'—and we were also putting on performances from 'the classics.' We put on plays from Belgian authors—comedies—though 'Farewell Berlin' was the first show I was involved in.

Another surprise, perhaps? People who know me know I like to laugh, but working in theatre and putting on a comedy production? This might be quite a revelation. I mention it because this is how I slowly got into youth work. My first workcamp project was an itinerant one, moving through three regions in Belgium and co-creating a performance on social inclusion with the participants.

Later, I started working for SCI (Service Civil International), with a focus on projects in the Middle East, and from there, the journey continued.

I brought two things with me into youth work—a deep sense of social justice—and today, I can still watch documentaries and be in tears. I can get so hopeless and frustrated, when I see the wrong that is being done in the world. This is very probably what was at the origin of wanting to work as a therapist, to support and accompany people, to address suffering, and to ease harder paths.

The second thing was not only the confidence but also the ability to 'perform,' to get up in front of people, to speak up, to advocate, to give voice to those who don't have one (or are not loud enough), or to bring to the attention and awareness of others, on issues that need to be addressed.

This passion to fight injustice is just one of the many layers that are part of my identity. Everything, in a sense, is connected to identity. A way to also look at what makes us us (almost despite us) is, as an example, the fact that my mother lives in Bonn, that the father of my son is from Dusseldorf, and that although I never thought I would live in Germany, I have been in Bonn for almost seven years. These are 'benchmarks' on the journey. Where is home? I don't really know; I'm not so sure. You can have roots in one place and your heart in another. Which one is home? Hard to say. Germany is part of my journey just as France, Spain, Belgium, and Serbia are.

Questioning your identity—where you're coming from and where you are going—is part of working out who you are and what you stand for, and welcoming what is calling, and what emerges along the way. My experiences are varied, and I have been involved in retail, hospitality, theatre, youth work, and now therapy and systemic work. These are the many layers and markers that form part of

our story, but my time in theatre was probably the door that led me on the path that I have trodden in recent years.

These snapshots of a journey do omit other parts, other people I owe so much to. My rich encounters in the Middle East are so, so dear. Some pieces of life, friends, time, and work in Galicia, Spain. My amazing history, theatre, maths, and gym teachers while in France. All those I met on the way. They all, too, formed my identity. Those are more stories to tell, to cherish, and to keep warm. And those stories carry so many other stories. Those are not mine to tell, but they are connected to me. As for the Celts, well, my son carries one of their most (well-known) famous magician's name.

“The fact of storytelling hints at a fundamental human unease, hints at human imperfection. Where there is perfection there is no story to tell.”

Ben Okri

“I had to also prove that there were no Nazi criminals among my ancestors along with many other things too. Long story short, I was finally holding my permit of permanent residence in my hand and ready to go. With my savings I could only buy a one-way ticket to Johannesburg and onto Cape Town.”

Arthur Longin

A blue-tinted portrait of Arthur Longin, a man with a beard and a cap, smiling. The background features several yellow stars of varying sizes.

Arthur Longin

Father, Grandfather, Lover, European Citizen, World Traveler, Africa Lover, Furrier, Property Agent, Facility Manager, Youth Worker, Coach, Social Therapist, Skipper, Fisherman – ANTI-RACISM ACTIVIST!

Mink Tales

Many years ago, in the second half of last century I was a young man with big dreams. Living in the green heart of Austria on the countryside, where the postman still came with the horse and the streets were not paved everywhere, I had to take a decision. My father said: 'You only have 2 options, either you go to school or you start an apprenticeship.'

I was 17 years old and had exactly no idea what to do, so I said exactly that to my dad. He replied that I had to make up my mind very soon and left. Knowing me as a not-too-successful scholar, I thought I might rather go work for money, but I had no idea what to do.

A few days later, my dad took me along to deliver some products to Graz, the capital city of Styria, and spoke to this businessman to see if he didn't perhaps have an apprenticeship for me. He replied that he knew a company called "SORAL-PELZE" in the city that was looking for a furrier apprentice.

So, my father asked me if I would like to do that. But I had no idea what a furrier did or what this profession was all about. Curious, I asked him. 'A furrier makes products like coats, jackets, trims, and collars out of skins. He also makes patterns mainly for ladies tailored to their measurements to fit the coats on to their bodies to look not only warm but also glamorous.'

For me, it was okay. I had no better plan, and I could start working on September 1, 1972. Wow! Even saying that, how long ago was that? The work was not that heavy duty but very fine and required some artistic talent to put the small skins together or to stretch them and nail them to boards overnight to complete the task of finally putting the coat together and making an old lady happy.

The years went by, and within six years I had become a master in the furrier trade. By then,

Austria had become too small for me, and I was feeling a bit caged by all the rules and regulations of our government.

Remember, I was still only 25 years old, so I wanted to experience something different. At that time, there were no Erasmus projects, EFD, ESK, or something similar. So, I had to make my own plan to enable me to make this change in my life.

In a trade magazine, I saw an advertisement where there was a South African company looking for a Master Furrier in Cape Town. This was perfect for me. I applied, and I got the position. I decided to emigrate on a permanent residence basis to South Africa.

Africa was always my dream when I was a little boy. But still, there was a long way to go to immigrate to a country like South Africa. We had to prove that there was no one in South Africa who could do my job, and the company had to prove to immigration that they needed me badly, and so on.

I had to also prove that there were no Nazi criminals among my ancestors, along with many other things. Long story short, I was finally holding my permit of permanent residence in my hand and ready to go. With my savings, I could only buy a one-way ticket to Johannesburg and onto Cape Town.

The first time I started getting a little scared and somewhat nervous about my ambitious new plan was when I was sitting all alone in the Boeing 747 with all my belongings in a 20 kg suitcase about to leave Vienna for my new life in South Africa.

I did not speak a word of English or Afrikaans at that time, but the lady who employed me was a refugee fleeing Germany in the war, and so I was confident we could communicate with each other.

The shock I felt when I arrived in Cape Town was great. It was a city of three million people, and here was I, a young man coming from a town of 6,000 inhabitants. There were no elephants, no monkeys, no lions, but big streets, enormous shopping centres, and already banking machines like Bankomat today.

And there was a system called apartheid, separating people based on their skin colour: blacks, coloured, Indians, Malaysians, and whites.

All of these races had different rights and duties. It was shocking for me to come from a country with equal rights for everybody—a real culture shock! Anyone reading this might smile now and not understand my surprise and culture shock.

Remember, it was 1981. As of yet, there was no Internet, no mobile phones, and no international TV channels available in Austria.

South Africa was banned from most European countries for its system of apartheid, and so little information was available. Certainly, very few knew the reality of it outside of South Africa.

But when you're young, you overcome all the obstacles much easier, so I was very quickly integrated into this new environment. I met Austrian, German, and many other immigrants, and they were also helping me with the language and other practicalities of my new home.

Not abiding by the rules of the apartheid system brought me some trouble very soon. I met a coloured girl and fell in love with her. This was forbidden in this country, and one day my employer called me to the office to tell me that I could get deported from South Africa if I didn't play by the rules.

Love was stronger than the rules of an unjust system, we stayed together and finally left South Africa after five years to 'remigrate' to Austria, get married, and have two sons. One of them is white, and the other is coloured. Now, 36 years later, I can say that the two boys—only because of their looks—had completely different socialisations and chances in life.

That's the reason why I am still an anti-racism activist. South Africa had written rules for racism; other countries do not, but they practice the same discrimination without written rules. Before the story gets too long, I will stop here.

My sons are well settled in Austria, and one has given me two grandsons already. This story is not finished, but it has a happy ending so far. My fur business finished in the 1990s. I learned some new trades until I finally arrived at my home in ERASMUS+.

It's not as lucrative as being a furrier, but home is where the heart is.

“My parents fled Hungary in 1956 and I was born in Netherlands. I felt this somewhat strange sense of unbelonging because I couldn't quite work out where my roots were, giving me that sense of complexity and chaos.”

Gabi Steinprinz

A blue-tinted portrait of Gabi Steinprinz, a woman with glasses, looking slightly to the right. The portrait is the background for the left side of the page.

Gabi Steinprinz

Chaos in Motion, Adventurer,
Immigrant, Family-Woman, Pro-activist,
Nerd, Multi-Lingual, Artist and Art-lover
– TAPESTRY DESIGNER!

My story is related to my being somewhat chaotic and complex. This might come as a bit of a surprise to say because, for those that know me, they might have the impression that I'm quite organised and in control. And for anyone to admit to being chaotic and complex, well, perhaps it sounds a little confessional and even odd to say so, almost like an admission of being disorganised and not in control.

But let me explain: I am complex, and there is a degree of chaos, but rather than try to deny this or push it away, I embrace it. It can be connected to my very intercultural background. I grew up in a village in a rural area of the Netherlands, and I was one of the first immigrants there. Of course, the perception of immigrants is that they are coming from Africa, but we were from Hungary, from behind the 'Iron Curtain.'

Also, for Hungarians, everything was different, the food, the language and so on. Even simple things like in the Netherlands, when at 5 p.m. the Dutch, are saying to you, 'We are having dinner' rather than this being a statement of fact, it's a sign that you should go home. In the Netherlands, I was the 'stranger', and when we went home to Hungary, I was the 'foreigner.' I'm sure that I'm not the only immigrant who feels this way.

When I was younger, I went to youth camps in Hungary for two weeks for 'my two weeks of belonging.' This happened from the age of 3 onward until I was 28. Officially, it was part of the scouting movement, there was a scouting element to it, but not necessarily the full scouting background. Everyone at the camps had a Hungarian identity, with people coming from all over the world—North America, South America, Australia, and so on. The camps were in Germany and Austria.

My parents fled Hungary in 1956, and I was born in the Netherlands. I felt this somewhat strange sense of unbelonging because I couldn't quite work out where my roots were, giving me that sense of complexity and chaos.

It was only when I got involved in Erasmus+ that it gave me a sense of belonging again. Going to the camps and all the mix that came with everyone coming from many different places and the bonding nurtured within Erasmus+, I felt I was 'coming home.' I feel myself at my best there.

People might be surprised to learn that Hungarian is my mother-tongue. Of course, I speak Dutch, and most will associate me with being from the Netherlands, but most will not know that at the age of one I moved to Africa, to Gabon, where I learned French, before moving to the Netherlands at the age of three. I also spent, one year in boarding school in Germany. I also learned Spanish and understand Italian as well. Some might say I'm a linguist—a multilinguist even—even though I do not consider myself one.

Growing up and hearing all these languages has been a blessing. I also learned sign language. But, of course, none of this happens by itself. Let me offer you an example. I learned to speak Spanish fluently now, but in my first youth exchange—in 1992, just at the beginning of the Erasmus+ programme—I managed to learn about 20 words in Spanish, but somehow on one occasion, I managed a 90-minute conversation with a Spanish guy (who had about 25 words in English).

Despite the limited vocabulary of both of us, the conversation was about quite deep stuff, like how it is to be an introvert. If we had spoken a common language, the conversation might have been over quite soon, but the very nature of our having complexity added to the dynamic and created space for growth, and it is the chaos that this brings that I am more than happy to embrace.

The experience made me feel proud, but I was also frustrated by the limitations of language, and that was my motivation to learn Spanish. As an autodidact (lessons did not seem to work for me), I am now not only fluent in Spanish, but I am also able to deliver training in Spanish.

All of this, though, brings complexity to my life. I like not knowing. Where most are uncomfortable with uncertainty, I embrace the complexity of it and the chaos it can bring. I am more than content; there is not one answer. I like the opportunity it presents, and in my work, I try to give people the opportunity to explore.

I don't like limiting things. I feel at home with complexity. With complexity, you see the lightness, like a labyrinth. In my first youth exchange, I could handle the situation because the challenges it brought immediately created the possibility to dive into opportunities for learning.

Where people like to solve problems, I welcome the complexity it presents. You can, of course, still solve problems, but I don't reject the stress that complexity brings. It's the opportunity for growth and learning that I embrace.

Just like how people are uncomfortable with quiet, I'm the opposite. I'm ok with the quiet, I like to be on my own. I can trace this back to my school experience. I had to be as smart as the boys in the class at school because girls were not encouraged to be smart. The misogyny was clear, and we felt we had to fight it. I learned when to be vocal and when to be quiet. I knew the moments to pick to be vocal and how to deal with the complexity of it even then.

I also have a love of numbers; in fact, I'm crazy about numbers. I would get high scores in both maths and physics. It's quite funny, I have that skill for numbers yet can't recite lyrics from songs, but I can answer in five languages. How does it go like this? I have no idea, but it doesn't matter. It's a little bit chaotic, and complex, but that's ok.

And even to make it more interesting, or perhaps more complex, I have applied to attend an art academy, but also study Hungarian and Finish. In addition, I also applied for a study in engineering! Perhaps, even more interesting is that I'm a Tapestry Designer. I create paintings, but they are woven into fabric.

I'm a trainer because I'm quite good at many things, but not excellent at anything special. I don't excel in anything, but I feel in my element when I'm in training. I'm using all my skills and cells. I'm a nerd; sometimes complexity requires a certain arrangement.

When I said at the outset, I was complex and chaotic, you might have found it strange, but as an immigrant, living in different countries, speaking several languages, being a Tapestry Designer whilst loving numbers yet not remembering the lyrics of songs—as you can see, it's a little chaotic and complex, but I embrace it, and it's me, and it's where I'm most comfortable.

“We wanted to do something about the library that had been destroyed by Bosnian Serbs. It was a symbol of opposition to the war because it had a long history but as libraries are places of education and where people learn, to restore it would be a symbol of education against intolerance fuelled by ignorance—everything the library stands against.”

Darko Markovic

A blue-tinted portrait of Darko Markovic, a man with a goatee, looking directly at the camera. The background is white with several yellow starburst shapes scattered around.

Darko Markovic

Belgradian, Father, Psychologist, Believer in Life, Systemic coach, Facilitator, Therapist for organisations, Future book writer, Wine Lover, Lifetime Learner, Former bass player - PUNK ROCK STAR!

I'm a former musician, some might even say a 'Rock Star,' albeit from a previous generation, a previous era, during a time of fundamental change, and a title that perhaps only applies to a small window of time and only in Serbia. Certainly not Rock Star on a par with Pink Floyd, Zeppelin, or even U2. Ok, enough of the caveats.

I have a long history and involvement in music. I was involved in the punk scene in Serbia. In my very early days, I even helped create a fanzine called 'No More Heroes.' We created two issues during our teenage years around the ages of 15 and 16, but I got a little bit more serious about music, and we had a band when I was ending secondary school around the age of 18.

Our band was called 'Dead Ideas.' It was more ironic than direct. It started in 1990 with one lineup, although it changed a little later. It started in relatively peaceful times and was very popular in Serbia (so in some people's eyes, we were 'Rock Stars'). It was one of the few bands with a female lead.

The war started in Yugoslavia when I was with my father in a record store in Vienna. It began in Slovenia, followed by Croatia, and then Bosnia.

Economically and socially, it was terrible. From 1991 on, there were huge demonstrations. March 1991 was the moment that Milosevic could have been taken down, but of course it didn't happen, and the rest is history. We had hyperinflation around 1992–93, and money was all but worthless. We had to sell German Marks for Serbian Dinars as we were under UN sanctions.

People were afraid of mobilisation. I was studying, so I managed to postpone it. I was a bit lucky to be able to postpone it. These were dark times. There was plenty of poverty, a breakdown of the system, and mafia guys on the streets.

I came back to Serbia, and as difficult as it was, the band continued. I played bass guitar. Paradoxically, it was the most creative period during those dark times. This followed the 1980s, when we had a new wave of New Waves.

We were in a documentary called 'Ghetto.' Around this time, there was a popular song called 'Wrong' in a style of music from the period 1993–95. The band that released the song was around from about 1990–96, and this song coincided with horrible wars in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

As musicians and activists, we wanted to do something constructive and show our opposition to the war. In Sarajevo, there was a city council building—historically an Austro-Hungarian building—that was a symbol of the war. After the Second World War, it was turned into a library. It was destroyed, however, by Bosnian Serbs in 1992.

Our band was against the war. It was not only our teenage project, but it was political. We had a song called 'War Games' that was inspired by our attitude and opinions of the war.

We wanted to do something about the library that had been destroyed. It was a symbol of opposition to the war because it had a long history, but as libraries are places of education and where people learn, to restore it would be a symbol of education against intolerance fuelled by ignorance—everything the library stands against.

Then, of course, there was no internet, and being able to spread word about events was old-fashioned and basic. We wanted to raise money through playing, but raising money from a concert, which was opposed to the war, was of course not really an option in Serbia.

There was, however, to be a 'Festival for Peace' in Italy around this time. An Italian organisation connected to anarchists in Trieste got in contact with anarchists in Serbia, who in turn got in contact with us and invited us to the 'Festival for Peace' which was to be a fundraising event to raise money towards the restoration of the library.

The festival would take place in a town called Rovigo. Getting there was not easy, though. We had to travel to Hungary first, then onto Slovenia, before crossing the border to get to Trieste in Italy. We were hosted by anarchist families. With no internet, there were lots of phone calls and plenty of exchanges through word of mouth. This was the contribution of our band to the restoration of the library.

The band stopped in 1996, but some of them are still active. A few years later, I moved away from music and started my own NGO, the Centre for Non-Violent Action, ironically while NATO was bombing Belgrade.

Later, I was coming to Sarajevo for training and peace-building work. On one occasion, I was on a taxi journey and translating for my Austrian colleagues what the taxi driver was saying about the war. When we passed the library, I shared modestly about my involvement. Symbolically, it meant so much!

The library has since been fully renovated and reopened in 2014.

I played a small part in its restoration, but symbolically, it was important to do so. A place of learning should not be sacrificed on the altar of violence or intolerance. We used our music to oppose the war and connected with others who shared our values.

Music has that power; it has the means to create change, to transform and facilitate unity in diversity while creating space and time for people to connect and build change. Wars will always come to an end, but music will endure forever.

“And in no way was it putting me off, once or twice per month, I became famous as a band mascot! When my bedtime was approaching, my mother came to pick me up. Just like the star performer, I stayed on stage for the least amount of time, but I collected most of the fame. I became the centre of attention for those who came to have fun.”

M.Serkut Kizanlikli

A blue-tinted portrait of a man with short dark hair, looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is white with several yellow starburst shapes scattered around.

M. Serkut Kizanlikli

Father, Husband, Non-formal Trainer, Former NA Staff, PCC Coach, EMCC Mentor, Youth Worker, Motorcyclist, Traveller, Speaker, Project Manager, Entrepreneur, Network Manager – **MUSICIAN!**

My father closed the door and left home. I was crying, 'Mummy, I want to go with Dad.' 'Yes, you will. But not now; it's time to go to bed, and you are so young.'

This dialogue happened almost every weekend. My dad dressed and left the house looking very handsome, and I cried after him: 'I want to go too; I want to go too.'

As a 4-year-old at that time, yes, it's true, 4-year-old, I remember because when we are children, we naturally focus on what we want rather than analysing what we really need.

So, you might be wondering: Where was my dad going every weekend?

My father had a music band with my uncle and three or four other men. They performed music every weekend at events such as celebrations or weddings. I would cry much more since my mother and I accompanied them several times, and I knew what kind of lively places they would go.

Then yes! I finally got it! In a short period of time, my efforts got results; new uniforms were sewn for me, and I got my place on the stage (I can prove it). Stage experience at four years old, wow!

And in no way was it putting me off, once or twice per month, I became famous as a band mascot! When my bedtime was approaching, my mother came to pick me up. Just like the star performer, I stayed on stage for the least amount of time, but I collected most of the fame. I became the centre of attention for those who came to have fun.

Indeed, music is my unchanging feature. In the beginning, it was a kind of professional lifestyle for me as a professional, as I covered my living expenses during my high school and university years. Although my primary profession was teacher-trainer-National Agency expert in the past 20 years, it has remained with me, but a bit more of a hobby.

The skills and achievements that I gained from life on the stage have helped me a lot in my years as a professional Erasmus worker, in my volunteering years, and even now in these years as a freelance trainer. Although this profession sometimes kept me away from my friends or similar interests in my younger years, the process was not so complicated.

Since there was no internet back then, I didn't have a chance to find the lyrics or listen to the music instantly on my computer. It was essential to be prepared in advance. It was necessary to try to write down the lyrics while listening or having to listen to them repeatedly. Knowing melodies as well was vital. This effort taught me to be responsible because you didn't have a chance to make excuses like 'I don't want to' or 'I couldn't prepare' on the most special day of the married couples.

Years have passed, but my music habits have not changed at all. Although the type of music I played was limited, the music I listened to was universal and continued. It is a wonderful pleasure to see the relationship between music and culture, the formation and connection of instruments, the types of dances, and the combination of cultures.

Sometimes, if you don't know the songs people request, handling the situation and responding to their crazy requests provide many areas for improvement. Although I can't perform anywhere regularly anymore, I have a keyboard, accordion, ney, and clarinet in my study room at home. I try to spend time with all of them whenever I can.

The listening continues ceaselessly. As I listen, I start to like going deep into the music, not just the words and the music, but the individual sounds of all the instruments; I like to discover them more. And the integrity of differences is lovely.

Something else that I cherish is the opportunity to share the same scene with my father. No longer is the joy of a four-year old being the centre of attention; the pleasure of performing with family members, uncles, and cousins is fantastic!

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, taking advantage of living in the same city with my cousins, we spent a pleasant night in a music studio where my father played the drums, I played the keyboard, one of my cousins played the classical guitar, and the other cousin played the bass guitar. In addition, my 12-year-old daughter also performed as a solo singer. Three generations together!!! Great!!!

Having so many musical instruments in the house also influenced my older daughter. Duru (14) has already started playing the guitar and taking the stage with her voice and guitar in school performances. So nice to see!

Is it possible that I get any misfortune in dealing with music and performing music on stage all the time? Yeah, I can't dance! I have not developed this skill, and I feel like someone who is inflexible when I dance. I also envy the people who dance beautifully.

Recently, a new one has been added to my hobbies; I bought a DJ-setup. It is so fresh for me, and I am at the beginning stage. Extracting pieces from the music, combining those pieces with other ones, and producing brand new products within the framework of their own originality. A pleasant pursuit, for sure!

My daughters also participate in this activity as much as they can. My youngest daughter, Doğa (a seven-year-old), loves the DJ setup and tries to understand the functions. My Wife? She listens and dances with the kids.

Let's see what the future will bring for all of us!

Wishing a world full of music...

“We planned a party, but we had no DJ. My friends and I had a couple of turntables, and we hosted the party, and it was great. Then I was invited to DJ at a club. A friend of mine called me and told me he thought I did the party well; ‘Next Saturday, you come and play at this club where I work as a sound engineer!’”

Michele Di Paola



Michele Di Paola

Geek, father, husband, old computers collector, lover, reader of books and comics (ok that's geek again), wannabe traveller and hiker, youth worker and trainer, black belt in problem solving -
LITERARY LOVER

I love to take pride in that I change my skin sometimes. In high school, I studied classic literature and art. I wanted to be a teacher of literature. I wanted to help young people understand the past by reflecting on the past. I started attending courses in literature and the arts at university.

Meanwhile, I also started youth work, and working with young people in schools, I realised I'm unable to stay in this world; all the rigid mechanisms in place in schools don't allow for, or certainly not for me, the space and me to explore literature, the arts, and human expressions in the way I would like.

Working with schools also meant that I saw how teachers do not teach with their 'heart.' Thus, I stopped university for many years—until COVID, when I returned, and I got my degree in literature. There I was, however, 50 years old in a classroom of 20+ year-old students; still, it was much easier going back into a classroom as a student than as a teacher.

Dealing again with poetry, literature, and the arts, I found myself thinking once again that I really love this stuff.

Just this morning (at the time of writing), I was working in my former high school and saw a group of students passing by, and I saw myself there. Feeling the call of literature and art again, the last year and a half, I am coming back to it.

Someone once said, 'There are two kinds of bad poets: those who keep their works in the cupboard and those who publish them.'

I love to take pride in changing my skin sometimes. At university, we had an association, and we managed to publish a few little things. Many years ago, I was writing too.

We published three books. I remember how shocked I was when I somehow found them in a bookshop months later. Messaggerie, an Italian publisher, distributed the books, but they didn't have an ISBN number, so they were hard to track. I was looking for other books and found mine on a shelf. I wrote about 3 or 4 poems in there.

In the first book, I had this idea that I would write about famous writers or poets in the Italian tradition and try to describe the feelings inside them and relate them to their artwork. The first four poems were in this kind of style.

The second book was more about suggestions. The context was a little bit more pessimistic about my country. I was suggesting, 'We deserve a mass extinction event.' There'd probably be survivors anyway, and the question would be, of course, how would they survive? You'd have to start from scratch, a kind of re-set, a chance to begin again, and make it better, I suppose, and I wondered how it could be in Milan.

The third book was translating works from other writers—some from the US—and lesser-known poets. Part of this was also about rhythm and rhymes. These elements not being in my mother tongue made it even more difficult to translate them into my language. It's way more complicated to use the right word in a translation if you also have to consider the rhythm of the sentence, and possibly the rhymes with the next lines. The challenge of translating it is what made it fascinating, though.

Years later, all this knowledge went into training courses about the power of storytelling, that I delivered with my friend Carmine here and there around Europe.

But let me go back in time a little to the mid-90s, long before I returned to literature. As I mentioned, I quit university and took some distance from poetry and literature. And I love to take pride in the fact that I change my skin sometimes.

At the time, political movements were growing in Europe. In Italy, it ended up with a second wave of what we call social centres (kind of squatted, self-managed community centres or communes) that produced any kind of social and cultural events; they were of course very political, with a strong component of putting people together; here you could find people who wanted “the revolution” or any kind of revolution in life, arts, food, whatever.

I became quite involved in this movement. In those places, there was also a growing movement in music—an unexpected uprising in rap and reggae, even if we did not have black communities in Italy back then. This black music came out of nowhere, and I felt it was very interesting, that people were rapping in Italian. I went quite a bit deeper into this movement, I was buying lots of this kind of music.

I still had contact with my old schoolmates, so I was disappointed to learn that the principal of the school made some racist comments to a student! So, we had a protest. We held a sit-in, and it was very successful, so we were also of the view let’s celebrate what we have done and acknowledge our intervention!

‘We planned a party, but we had no DJ. My friends and I had a couple of turntables, and we hosted the party, and it was great. Then I was invited to DJ at a club. A friend of mine called me and told me he thought I did the party well; ‘Next Saturday, you come and play at this club where I work as a sound engineer!’

There was a concert, and I would DJ before and after it. Wow! How did that come about, I wondered? From literature to a revolutionary to DJ? Well, I love to take pride in changing my skin sometimes. In an act of total coincidence, my sister, and her group of friends (about 50 of them) happened to be at the concert. I played for about 90 minutes, and they loved the music I played.

I obviously did something right because the owner of the club said, ‘You become the resident DJ on Friday and Saturday.’ And this went on for more than 10 years.

I loved reggae so much that I ended up playing Thursday nights as well in another little club. Then I went up playing reggae in other cities and even other countries, alongside my reggae crew called ‘Monza Ina De Yard.’

These were great days, but in my late 30s, I found I was getting tired. I was doing all of this while doing youth work as my daily job. I had just become a father. Something had to give.

I still see something in the connection between reggae music, literature or poetry, and activism. I’ve come full circle, as it were.

I didn’t get the revolution, but I lived my passion for reggae and shared it with many others, and now, I’m back to where I started—realising how much I owe to literature and the arts. Perhaps it’s time to put pen to paper again?

“There was one important company we couldn’t get, and so we altered our approach. We just went to the office after one month of avoiding us. The receptionist has no idea who I am—there’s a ‘white guy in a suit’ she said to the boss, waiting to meet you! I looked the part—fancy blue suit, gelled hair, nice watch—but I’m still broke!”

Darko Mitevski

A close-up portrait of a man with dark hair and a beard, looking directly at the camera. The image is overlaid with a blue semi-transparent box containing text. The background of the entire page is white with several yellow stars of varying sizes scattered across it.

Darko Mitevski

Macedonian spirit with German influence, Trainer, Dancer, Gardener -
BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT CONSULTANT!

I started out in youth work as a youngster at 19, working at AIESEC, the largest student-run organisation in the world. After 5 years, I went through all the positions at the organisation. I learned loads but was tired of being broke, or rather completely broke all the time. I had to find something else where I earn well, so I started an MBA with a focus on Strategic Management and landed at a consulting company.

I was no longer broke. I was earning as much as my father did in his 50s, but they squeezed every bit of juice out of me working 24/7. I wanted to quit, but my boss was a powerful woman. Offers started to dry up when my boss got a sniff of me wanting to leave.

I applied for some UN jobs abroad, and this was how I ended up in Tanzania. I couldn't go in the end with the UN, but all the interviews I had and the research I did, I have 'discovered' Tanzania. Not getting a UN job wasn't the end of my love story with Tanzania.

I did discover it for real. I applied for a 2-month internship. The next day, the boss of the company called me. He was quite curious: 'You worked in these important companies; why do you want to make me coffee in Tanzania as an intern?' I replied, 'You will have the best coffee and best photocopies' ever. I need to get out of here.' The two months later tuned into almost a year.

The boss told me that his company was nearly bankrupt, but off I went without really knowing what or how it was going to go. I was technically supposed to stay in my own room in my own place, but after being picked up from the airport and travelling on dirt roads to our accommodation, I got a sense it wouldn't be quite like that.

I was greeted by a Massai Warrior whose role was to welcome and protect our group. Who gets their own personal protection, right? And not even just personal protection, but a Massai Warrior, right?

I arrived at a building with 30 other volunteers. There were 3 toilets and 3 showers. My room had two bunk beds and no wardrobes. Wardrobes are overrated, right?

And there was no running water; electricity was on and off. In fact, the house occupants were fighting over water. I was assured, 'don't worry, you will get used to it.' I was then asked, 'do you have a mosquito net?' The 30 bites on my face the following day were a clear testament to the answer.

I put on my suit and waited for the dala-dala bus. It duly arrived, and I got on, but there we sat for a while. 'Why are you not going?' I asked. 'The bus is not full yet!' came the reply. Needless to say, I wasn't on time, not remotely. I was two and a half hours late, sweaty and dusty on my first day at work.

I wanted to quit and go back to Europe, but I reassured myself: 'What will you learn if you leave now?'

One of the first people I got to know from the house I was staying in was Jim, a dude with a blond afro and glasses and someone who irons like there's no tomorrow. He was also working as a junior consultant / intern. 'Tonight, there is a salsa 'party'—there you can meet all the 'white people' who were the heads of the companies, he told me. There was a perception that all white people were rich, but little did they know I was broke. Jim worked for a company, but he was an intern himself too.

The party took place on the second or third day I was there. Music was playing, but no one was dancing. Jim was a really good salsa dancer, so we had the idea of making a kind of show. Before long, everyone else had joined in. As a result, I got to know the whole room. Jim said, 'This party is good, but there's an even better party on the rooftop of the Kampinski Hotel. Ms. Tanzania is having her farewell party for the Ms World competition.' It just so happened that Jim was her salsa teacher for the talent show of the contest.

We tried to convince the security, but they weren't having any of it. We weren't on the list. There were a couple of people behind us in the lift. One appeared to be gay and flirting with us. And somehow, before we knew it, we were all taken in.

Now there's only one problem. A roof-top party among the top people in Tanzania, and I have 3 dollars and Jim has 5 dollars—a beer costs 7 dollars. There is only one thing to do. We shared a beer!

I see Ms. Tanzania; surrounded on the dance floor but no-one is dancing. There's only one thing to do. I introduce myself; I'm Jim's friend, of course. I asked if I could check what she learned from him so far. I made space in the room and started dancing with her. Jim came back from wherever he was, and then he took the other girls out to dance.

At this stage, people want to get to know us. People are lining up from all sorts of companies - brewing, music, and banking. We exchanged details and got to know people on a personal basis.

In the company where I did the internship, we developed a strategy to stop the company going into bankruptcy. At that time, the biggest business was billboards. It was a \$200 million dollar business with 15 competitors, and our company was the smallest. Somehow, with grit, determination, and a load of self-belief, we managed to pull a rabbit out of a hat.

For our first gig, the boss told me to play to their strengths—not to compete with the big brands! Our advantage was that we had good contacts with local government, and we should focus on what the community needs. It needed basic infrastructure—lights, roads, etc. And we can advertise on them. Win-Win.

We got contracts with local municipalities, but our challenge was, how do we get money in? Contacts from the parties, of course—they'd get a 50% discount, but only if they bought in bulk, all of them. We started selling big time.

There was one important company we couldn't get, and so we altered our approach. We just went to the office after one month of avoiding us. The receptionist has no idea who I am—there's a 'white guy in a suit' she said to the boss, waiting to meet you! I looked the part—fancy blue suit, gelled hair, nice watch—but I'm still broke!

This became our 'modus operandi' to get work accomplished. Just turn up without warning, appear, and sound good! We had a good strategy and product!

We signed a lot of contracts, but still, money had not started flowing in. So, we went to the bank and showed them the contracts. We built thousands of light poles, bus stands, and garbage bins. The company spread to Kenya, Rwanda, and Uganda in the next few years. One million dollars in income by the end of the year, we avoided bankruptcy.

The workload was beginning to take its toll, however. Jim and I started to get sick. I was still working on my thesis. But I wanted to leave. I was taking medication for malaria and got some unexpected rashes. The pills were lowering my immune system and making me hallucinate. It turns out that the detergent I was using was seeping into my pores. I had to leave.

The boss asked me to stay and promised me a partnership, a house, a car, to find me a wife, and a doctor that if you sneeze at 3 a.m., the doctor will visit you—but he couldn't convince me. The amount on the piece of paper opened my eyes and mouth, but I had to leave.

I came back home to Macedonia, the rashes went away while I started my own company, developing small and medium enterprises. I continued going dancing and hosted some Couch Surfers at home.

One of those surfers turned out to be someone I fell in love with. Later, she became my wife, Svenja (now ex), who actually founded NaturKultur some months later after we met. Haha, how did I become part of NaturKultur? She was organising a youth exchange, and she asked me if I would like to cook for the group? My heart answered yes.

And the rest is history, as they might say.

“You’re never going to kill storytelling, because it’s built in the human plan. We come with it.”

Margaret Atwood

