

Senka K.

"Wherever we are, life is a great piece of luck for us all"



Senka K., f., from Mojkovac in Montenegro in 1961, in Switzerland since 1990

Where were you born?

In Montenegro, in 1961. That's still Yugoslavia. Montenegro lies in the south, by the sea. I grew up ten minutes from the centre of the small town of Mojkovac. The town had 12,000 inhabitants in those days, though it's grown since. It's very beautiful, surrounded by mountains, and lies on the Tara, a very clean river, in which I learned to swim. We owned a house and 75 Ares (7,500 m²) of land, which we had planted with fruit trees. My parents are both Montenegrins. They speak Serbo-Croat, and we children do too.

What did your father do for a living?

He worked in a furniture factory, as did my mother. My father had contracted an illness during the Second World War, and had problems because of this. He retired early.

We were brought up very strictly. While others could go out to the disco in the evening or take a stroll, we were forbidden. At the most I could go out if my brothers, twins a year and a half younger than me, went with me. We weren't allowed to play cards or play on the streets either. My father didn't want his children to grow up on the streets.

At first there were three children, and then, six months after my brothers were born, my sister came. At the age of seven I had to help look after her, which I didn't like very much. When my sister was ten years old, she went to an aunt in Belgrade, because there was no music school near us. So she grew up in Belgrade, and for ten or twelve years we saw each other only in the summer holidays. After finishing secondary school my brothers and I went to Belgrade to study. My contact with my sister intensified, and today she's still my best friend. She lives in Belgrade, and is married with two children. She's a music teacher, and she sings

in a mixed military choir. During the war she gave concerts in uniform all over Yugoslavia, and I was very worried about her.

Do you remember happy moments during your childhood?

My mother used to preserve fruit, such as prunes. One time we stole a whole pot and threw the jar away. My mother was aghast and said: "my God, where's the prune jar? The guests are here." There wasn't any prune jar any more.

Did you listen to the radio as children?

Yes, my parents used to listen to a lot of folk music, and we were used to it. Every morning at around six or seven, we'd hear this music and the news, because my mother went to work at around this time. Then my father would get up and make coffee. Every morning was like this.

When I was six or seven years old, my parents bought a television. It was called a "Major 67". My father still has this set. At that time, not many people had a TV. So lots of the neighbours used to come around to watch the news. We children were in bed by then, but we could hear what was being said on the TV anyway. Because one of our neighbours was hard of hearing, they would turn the volume up on the TV.

What were your schooldays like?

When I was eight years old, I had an accident at school. A child injured my eye with a pencil. My teacher kept me in school until the end of the day. This led to a great deal of complications with my eye. When I came home, my father took me straight away to a specialist. Seven operations were needed in three and a half months. I still can't see very well with my right eye, but at least I didn't lose it. That was one bad experience with one bad teacher.

Apart from that, school was good. I was a very good pupil. Afterwards I attended the technical school and then went to Belgrade to study furniture design. But I didn't finish my degree. There were still four or five exams to take, but the situation in my country was getting worse and worse. My parents couldn't send me much from their low wages. I had to look for work so as to live. I worked in various places: in a restaurant, at a buffet, cleaning, in a factory. I spent about half a year working in the paper factory, doing the first shift. When that was over I'd go straight to a second job in a pizzeria. Then I'd sleep three or four hours and be back at the factory the next morning. It was tough, but there wasn't any other way.

In 1989 a friend asked me: "do you want to go abroad to work?" I'd never considered it before. But I was in a difficult situation: I had debts with various relatives and had tried to get a job at a big company as a data entry clerk, but they'd just put me off until later. No future,

no wages, no steady job and no degree. My friend talked to me about Switzerland, but I'd only heard about it in geography class and knew that it was somewhere in Europe. So I said "yes, I'll go. I'll try it and afterwards come back and maybe carry on with my studies." I thought it over for seven days, to and fro. But I had to have my parents' permission.

They had, in the meantime, sold the house in Montenegro and moved near to Belgrade, where they had bought a bigger house and land. I told my parents about my plans. My mother said: "No. You're a girl. It's very difficult. Who knows what's there?" But my father said: "go. If it works out badly, come back home."

So I rode in a car to Switzerland on a Saturday. I wasn't happy, but I wasn't sad either. I didn't know I was leaving my country forever. I thought I'd be coming back one day.

The day of our arrival was a cloudless August day: everything was green, everything was clean. I thought: my God, this is a beautiful country. I couldn't believe that Switzerland looked like this. Then I went to a Yugoslavian woman in Basel. She had two little girls. I looked after these children. I was there for a year, on a tourist visa. This solitude was bad for me.

What did you do in the evenings?

This woman had a lot of books. I read a lot. I also thought I'd never learn the German language. I only knew a couple of words from films about the Second World War. This woman said to me: "you have to watch a lot of television. Then it comes automatically. She also paid for a course at Migros Clubschule. At first I didn't even know that you should greet people with "gruezi".

A neighbour and her husband took me with them to a Yugoslav festival. It was 6 May 1990. That was where I met my future husband. It wasn't planned, it was just fate. He was working here as a fencing constructor and comes from Valjevo, in southern Serbia. We were married after two and a half months.

At first we lived for a year in my husband's one-room flat. When I became pregnant, we took the three-room flat where we still live today. We have two daughters now. They know that I'm from Serbia, and that they are Serbian too, but that they were born here, and that they will become Swiss. They'll go to school here, and they'll work here.

Have you chiefly looked after the children, or have you also gone to work?

In the first year I worked in a cafeteria. I had a work permit. When the first child was born I took a break. After another year the second child came. Two years after my husband and I got together, he became a salesman for the Z company: they sell crockery, pots and porcelain. We

worked together at that, and a cousin looked after the children. The Z company is Yugoslavian. It has branches in over thirty countries. It was established in Switzerland in 1992. We met a lot of Yugoslavian customers. We gave presentations in the people's flats. We became friends with some of them.

Then we had problems with the boss of Z, and we haven't worked for them for two years. The employment office organised a six-month programme for me: selling at a second-hand shop for the asylum seekers' organisation. They also paid for me to have an intensive German course. My adviser at the employment office organised an additional three-month course. That's very good. I also attended a computer course and have a computer now. In 1990 I took my driving test. I've also learned English. I paid for that myself.

What experience have you had of the Swiss in the ten years that you've been here?

The Swiss have a different mentality from ours. People here tend to live on their own and don't need much company. They don't meet at each other's homes as we Yugoslavs do. For us it's normal to have ten guests or to drink a coffee when seven people come to my place uninvited. With a Swiss woman, I have to phone first and ask if she has time. I know this now, but at first it struck me as a bit odd.

Another thing that's different with us: if people here go somewhere to drink a coffee, everybody pays for their own. But I've got used to that too.

What so you like here that's better than in Yugoslavia?

That everything is clean: no paper or cigarettes on the street. And the discipline. And that the police do everything that a police force should do.

What do you miss about Yugoslavia?

We're used to lots of company. People can come and sit and drink and be loud at my place until midnight. But we have to be careful, because we've got Swiss caretakers here. I haven't had much success with Swiss people at Swiss parties. I've gone to some, but I was careful not to do anything wrong. Even if everything is spotless in Swiss restaurants, there's a different atmosphere from that in Belgrade. The music is louder there That's just the nature of the people. In Belgrade I'm a native speaker, so I get into contact with people far faster. That's automatic. And here there's a distance.

Is that also connected to the language?

Yes, that's why I want to learn German so well that I can speak freely on the streets without making a mistake. At first I was very afraid of making mistakes. I always made efforts to understand everything. But I still have problems understanding Swiss-German, because I learn High German at the school. Sometimes I say: "Please speak High German with me." Some people are sympathetic, some are not.

Will you go back to Yugoslavia?

We haven't discussed this issue at all. Things haven't got any better in my country, but worse. Since we've had the children, we've looked on Switzerland as a second home. In our hearts, Yugoslavia is still our homeland. But this is my children's homeland, and consequently, of course, our second homeland.

Do you know the parents of other schoolchildren?

Yes, but not very well, just from the parents' evenings. We say hallo on the street. But life here is busy and stressful. We don't have time to develop friendships. Maybe that's connected to the language too.

How did the Swiss deal with you when you first came to Switzerland?

Absolutely normally. I've never had bad experiences with Swiss people. All the Swiss I've met have been nice to me, despite my poor German. They also took the time to understand me and correct my mistakes. Only recently have I had a couple of problems, because of politics. For instance, one woman would only attend a course for unemployed people if there were no foreigners here. Or if I apply to a company for a job, they ask: "where do you come from?" I always say, "from Yugoslavia". Because for me Yugoslavia still exists; I can still hardly grasp that it's been broken up. So when I say, "I come from Yugoslavia", then they ask: "where in Yugoslavia?" Then I say "from Serbia". "Ah, you're Serbian?" - "No, I'm a Montenegrin." Then sometimes I get the question: "Are the people in Montenegro and in Serbia the same?" Why do they ask? They're the same people. That hurts. That disturbs me. The fact that I'm a Yugoslav, Serbian, Montenegrin, is a reason why I can't find a job. The war made it all worse. I can feel it on the street too, that people look askance at me. But I'd like to live normally here as I have until now. I'm not responsible for politics.

This happens at school too. Shortly after the war started, some children said to my daughter: "We hate Serbs. We hate Yugoslavs". And my daughter said: "I hate Albanians". My children play with Albanian children every day. That's normal. Everyone lives together in Switzerland. I told my daughter: "You're not allowed to say that you hate Albanians". I teach my children not to hate anyone.

How does your children's future look?

I'm really worried by the fanatics on all sides. I'm also worried that one day there'll only be 20 percent real Swiss and 80 percent from all over the world. I'm integrated. I can live normally like all the other Swiss. I just have to improve my German. But when, say, I see people in these strange headscarves, then I have the feeling that I'm not in Switzerland, but some other place. If we live in Switzerland, we have to respect the way people live here.

Do you think that people should adapt to being here and not wear these clothes?

Yes. If they want to integrate into this society, then they should live like the other Swiss.

How often have you been back to Yugoslavia in the last nine years?

Once a year. I have no reason to support my parents financially, because they live comfortably there. But I want to see my parents, my sister and my brothers and their children now and again. I want my children to play with these children, so that they don't forget their language and that they know that they have brothers and sisters in Yugoslavia. And maybe, too, that they can also take their holidays with the family in Yugoslavia in the future too. We're closely in touch. We telephone every second or third day, my children too. I want to go down this summer and see what the war has changed.

How has your image of Yugoslavia changed?

Earlier we weren't poor: not rich, but we were all equal. In that sense, we were rich. Now because of the economic situation and the social problems, there are huge inequalities between rich and poor. It's like a pair of scissors. During the war I saw people in Bosnia rummaging through containers for something to eat. That's really sad, and it'll get worse: because now lots of people have no work, and the factories have been destroyed by bombing. Many people don't have the money to live.

