

University of Groningen

From the village to the city

Caro, Erka

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Preface

All my life I have been a sort of migrant. I was born in Gjirokastra, the city of my parents and grandparents located in the very South of Albania. However, this was a coincidence as I was supposed to be born in Kurbnesh, the city to which my parents were sent by the Communist Party of that time, located in the very North of Albania. I came into this world almost a month before the due date, during family holidays, somehow I feel out of my subconscious desire to be born in the same place as my parents and grandparents.

Afterwards my life has been one of temporary migrations from place to place until finally in 1988 with the start of the demise of the communist regime, together with my family, I moved to Tirana, the capital city of Albania. Furthermore, almost 10 years ago, I started my life as an emigrant. I remember very well that moment when I embarked towards a new and exciting world full of uncertainties, unknowns, joys and desires. I am one of the millions of Albanians who moved across and outside Albania after the 1990s. All of them were in search of a better life, fulfillment of their dreams, new opportunities, escape from the poverty and harsh conditions of a transition period in an ex communist country.

I left Albania because I wanted to fulfill my dreams, to be independent to study and to build up my career. None of this would have been possible without Groningen and without PRC. I came here in 2004 as a master student and continued as a PhD student. All these years have been years of joy, struggles, and happy moments but also sad ones. I have been working for this thesis the last 4 years and this would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of so many good friends and colleagues.

My deepest gratitude, not only on the academic front, goes to my promoter Leo van Wissen and my friend and co-promoter of this thesis Ajay Bailey for advising and supporting me all these years. Leo, thank you for everything you have done, for believing in me all the way long, for taking up qualitative research even though is 'not your thing'. Thanks for letting me make my decisions and learning from my mistakes. Thanks for being always present and for giving valuable professional and personal advices. You made me feel at ease during our meetings and discussions as I was talking to a friend rather than to a professor. Moreover, thank you for visiting my country and for being with me during the fieldwork, it meant a lot to me and gave me motivations to keep going to the end.

My dear friend Ajay, how could I have done it without you? Really! Thank you for sharing with me your knowledge, opinions and expertise. Moreover, thank you for all the coffees, chats, dinners and for not getting angry after the thousandth time I knocked on your office door on one of 'those' days. You have been a constant motivation and a trusted place to come to when I felt frustrated or lost. No better person than you knows the ups and downs of this thesis and my life as a PhD student. You and Kanika will always be my favorite couple in Groningen and Delft! I will be waiting for you in Tirana, and please do not wait for a wedding until you come!

A special appreciation goes to the head of the department, and the dean of the faculty Inge Hutter. Inge, you have been an inspiration for me all these years. The meetings and discussions with you have been very important. It was during these discussions that this PhD took another turn and finally I started to do what I really love, be with the people! Thank you for the support and help during the fieldwork. I treasure your advices and in moments of difficulty, they have always come to the rescue!

A special thank goes to Stiny who has been my first contact with PRC and Groningen and has provided continued support from 2004 until this day. Many thanks to Meredith Tavener for her help with the English corrections and for her constructive comments and assistance during the writing of many papers. Many thanks to the members of the “Migration and Culture” group in Groningen: Ajay, Anu, Louisa and Tekke. Thank you for the fruitful discussions and your comments that made my papers better. I am also grateful to the Faculty of Spatial Sciences and the Population Research Center for funding the fieldwork for this thesis.

There are many other people to whom I would like to express my gratitude for making these years pleasant, both academically and socially. I have enjoyed the company of Marieke, Anu, Alessandra, Fanny, Ajay, Rizwan, Meredith, Louisa, Shirish, Billie, Anthe, Biswamitra, Karen, Elda. Anu and Ale, thank you for all the coffee breaks and nice conversations, even in your ‘blondie’ days. Moreover, I would like to thank all my other PhD colleagues. I have spent good times with Marianna, Mirjam, Rixt, Candice, Viktor, Petra, Elen, Sander, Sierdjan and many other colleagues. Anu, Marianna and Mirjam see you on Wednesday for Pilates!

Marieke who else if not you could have been my paranimf! You have been with me all these years sharing not only the office but also beautiful moments as well as stressful ones. I thank you for your friendship, support and help. Thanks a lot for the help with the Dutch translation of the summary. *Bedanked vor alles!*

Groningen has been not only the city where I studied but also has been home for all these years. I have made many friends here and many of them will be for life. Primarily my gratefulness goes to Fiora (a.k.a Firoelina or Fio). She has been my housemate, my best friend and my Italian teacher. *Grazie Fio per farmi sentire a casa e non solo quando ero a casa, per aiutarmi e per sopportarmi tutto questo tempo! Ora dopo piu di 4 anni non riesco nemmeno a pensare come si poteva vivere senza di te a Groningen. Prometimi che non ci perderemo mai di vista. Ti voglio un sacco di bene!*

To my other friends in Groningen, you have made me feel at home here. Thanks for all the dinners, coffees, fun together. Fiora, Sara, Hoeke, Girste, Massimo, Ruut, Ale, Joona (and the little one!). Sara and Girste I have enjoyed a lot our ladies nights, movies, high tea and talks! I am happy that you have decided to stay in Groningen (although for Sara I was sure). I want to dedicate a special thanks to the chemistry team of Groningen; during these years, they have totally changed my beliefs! Can you believe it, they are not nerds! They are fun people! I thank Lachlan, Massimo, Nop, Wim and Pieter for all the good times.

I did not know where to place this section; somehow, it belongs to both Holland and to Albania. It belongs to my little Albania in Holland, so I placed it in-between. In these years, I have been blessed to have near me my best friend Morava. I want also to thank Jeroen for bringing her to Holland and for keeping her here. Moreover, Lorina and Emi have been my Albanian community and security system in Groningen. Lorina, you are one of my best friends in Groningen and I love living with you in the center! Emi, thanks for how you are and for always making me smile. Moreover, thanks for the help with the Dutch translation of the summary.

This thesis has been part of Albania and Kamza as much as it has been of Groningen. There are countless people back home I would like to thank for their help and support.

First and foremost I am grateful and particularly indebted to all those women and men who not only shared their migration stories and life experiences with me but also became my friends, shared their tears and joys, opened their homes and shared their food with me. I have learned so much from them in this process, things that go beyond this thesis and that will be there my whole life.

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My gratitude also goes to all good and old friends that I have back home. They have always been there for me, standing me during my many (not always pleasant) reintegration phases every time that I went back. *Sipas rendit alfabetik, rrofsb Dasbi, Redi, Eli, Piti, Aksinja, Edi, Rida, Zheni, Loli dhe Geri (s'kam qenë asnjëhere shumë e mirë në gjubë). Në dasëm të të pamartuarve, dhe në gëzime të tjera.* Loli and Geri you are my favorite people in the whole World and my best friends. I love you both so much. Thank you for coming to my defense! It means a lot to me.

I want to express my thankfulness to my second family in Albania, Bali, Jonida dhe Gersi. *Faleminderit për dashurinë që më jepni dhe për pritjen e ngrohtë sa herë kthehem në shtëpi.*

I have dedicated this thesis to my parents. They have taught me to never give up and to follow my dreams. They have been a huge support for me these years, even though it has been hard for them to be far away for so long. But now I am happy to have made them proud of me. They, together with my little brother, Fotjon have been a source of motivation and a warm nest to return to in the moments of nostalgia. *Mami, e di që për ty ka qenë një periudhë shumë e vështirë pa mua afër, por më beso dhe për mua ka qenë po aq e vështirë. Faleminderit që megjithë dëshirën për të më pasur pranë, nuk më ke dekurajuar asnjëherë, perkundrazi! Babi, hë mo si po të duket? Faleminderit*

për kurajon që më ke dhënë vazhdimisht! Ta kam borxh dhe të dua shumë. Ftoj, për një gjë të falemnderoj tej mase, që ke duruar mamën dhe babin sa për dy gjilbë këta vjet. Që këtej e tutje s'do jesh më vetëm...

Most of all I owe much to Gerti who has been my spiritual and mental supporter and companion through this time. He is part of this thesis as much as I am. I am grateful to him for his patience, love, care and support. He has followed me in every step, read critically through my papers; given me advice and practical assistance with the layouts of this thesis, translations and much more. *Të falemnderoj zemër që më ke ndenjur kaq pranë, më ke kuptuar, pritur dhe pranuar kështu siç jam. Vetëm nuk do tja kisha dalë mbanë.*

I will stop here even though I could fill many pages with acknowledgments and names and I am grateful to have been so lucky and have so many friends and people to thank!

Tirana, April 2011