

Ilianna's interview

Q: How did your parents decide to immigrate and who came first?

A: My dad came first.

Q: Why did he choose to come to this country instead of going elsewhere?

A: My dad was thinking about leaving because there was a big migration wave from Albania. It was around 1997 or earlier when there was a civil war, my parents used to tell me about this, so the things were a little dangerous. At the beginning they were thinking of going to England but my dad decided to come to Greece because it was close to Albania and he could come illegally on foot. That's why he chose Greece.

Q: Where did you live in Albania?

A: My dad is from Koukes but I don't know where it is because I never went there. I grew up with my mom's relatives near Fushe Kruje which is 45 minutes north of Tirana.

Q: What do you mean when you say you "grew up"? I mean, how many years did you stay there?

A: I can't remember very well. I came here when I was about 1 to 2 years old, we stayed here for a short time and then my dad realized that this wasn't right. We could not live with him and he decided to be reunited with our family back home. We returned with my mom, we stayed there for a little bit. I remember that I went to kindergarten there but I don't have a lot of memories. Then my father realized that it was the wrong choice so he told us to come back. I can't remember when we came back but when I came back I went immediately to the second year of primary school. I didn't know the Greek language, I knew only the Albanian language. Until now my mom can't speak the Greek language very well.

Q: How did you manage to collaborate with 15-20 children who could speak the Greek language very well?

A: I can't remember but I must have communicated with them a little bit because I was learning some Greek words when I was going to the village for a walk.

Q: How was it when you came here for the first time?

A: I don't have a lot of memories. I remember only the things that my mom has told me. We had been driven to the border by a taxi and then we walked secretly through the mountains. My mom remembers that she held me in her arms and she begged me not to cry because she didn't want us to be heard and when I fell down I didn't cry and we passed into Greece. The situation with my brother was easier because it was a legal entry.

Q: Who did you leave behind, grandfathers, grandmothers; who else?

A: We left all of them behind, we came here alone with nobody else from my mother's and from my father's family because my father had moved from Kukes to my mom's village. Their wedding was because of "profit" as my mom's family was the most powerful family in the area so they told my father that it was a good chance for him to get related to a strong family.

Q: So you were the only ones to come here out of the whole family.

A: Yes and my uncle's family.

Q: Did they leave Albania together?

A: Yes, the 2 siblings came first; my father and his brother who had got married with 2 sisters, my mother and her sister.

Q: How did they reach Chalkidiki?

A: Someone who they had met in the past, brought them here for a job and they ended up here without thinking about it a lot.

Q: That means, incidentally.

A: They knew that there were agricultural areas, they could work in the fields.

Q: Did they know the job, had they worked in the fields before?

A: No, they didn't know the job. They asked some workers to help them, they told them for example "go and pick the olives".

Q: Nice. Now, what do you remember about yourself when you came here? What were your first pictures? What was the most exciting thing for you?

A: I think I only remember some things from photos. The first year we came here in March and it was snowing. We had some photos in front of the house; it was snowy. From my childhood years I remember my two neighbors who were very good. One of the two had a granddaughter and she called me sometimes to play with her. I can remember the center of the village where we went out to spend our time. I can't remember all the names of the children. On the one side of our house was Ms K. and Ms Tr. on the other side but she died a long time ago.

Q: Are you friends with the grandchildren, were they students in our school?

A: No, they didn't study in this school.

Q: Did you really hang out with those kids? Didn't it bother them that you were foreigners?

A: No, no they took care of us. We stayed sometimes with them because our parents were working in their fields. When our parents had to leave us alone in our house, they took care of us. They also used to give us treats.

Q: You also answered the next question. Who were the people, who helped you, when you arrived?

A: Yes, our neighbors.

Q: Great. They really helped. But were there any other people, who thought that you were different?

A: No. In the beginning I did not notice this behavior.

Q: Is there anything you want to share with us? We will not press you to say something that you don't want.

A: No, in the beginning there was nobody. Now I am nervous.

Q: Don't be. Did you notice anything weird later?

A: I never really felt like I was a foreigner. They never made me feel bad for my origins. I don't remember well. Maybe there were some small embarrassing situations.

Q: You were always a really good student. Did your teachers use to say: "Good Job Iliana"?

A: Yes, yes.

Q: Have you ever faced any problem with some teacher?

A: Yes, once in 5th grade. I never really understood why. Maybe I am a little bit dramatic. I had a problem with a teacher in my village, but I don't know if I should talk about it.

Q: You can either share your story or not, it's up to you. You can also tell the story, without mentioning the names.

A: Yes, because my family had some short of relationship with this teacher. My mom used to go to his house, once or twice, in order to iron his clothes. Then she found out that he also had another lady to help him with the housework. My mom thought that they might not be pleased with her work and that was the reason she stopped going. As a result, suddenly even though until then he

claimed that I was a really good student and he used to call me a star, genius etc. -he taught me for a few months- I remember that my grades were all 10 except for four 9. He also did the same thing with two or three of my classmates, who -in my opinion- were not in the same level with me. I don't think that I have a wrong self-image, cause a few months later, a teacher from Thessaloniki came to our school. She did not know any of us and she commended me. After that, the next time we took our grades I had all 10 except from 1 nine.

Then I went to the 6th grade. In the end of the 5th grade I started noticing some behavior changes. Some of my best friends started avoiding me. We were all in all 11 kids -9 girls and 2 boys- and two of my best friends started shunning me. This situation annoyed me. Another girl told me "I refuse to go to the marching school parade with an Albanian girl holding the Greek flag."

Q: Those were probably her parents words.

A: Probably, but I have met this woman several times and she is a really good woman. I just can't believe that one kid told that, just because their parents used to have this belief.

Teachers had to choose one student from the 5th grade -obviously the one with the best grades. Teachers did not choose me immediately, although my grades were the best. The teachers chose to select by ballot. So, another student had been selected by a ballot, between many other students. That was the first time I felt discriminated and I did not like it at all.

In the 6th grade all of my classmates started avoiding me. All of them! There were 3 or 4 girls, who were "the school bosses" and they ruled the class. That year I felt being bullied for the first time, especially from one girl, who was bad with everyone. I remember once we were painting our own Easter eggs, her eggs were not good enough, so she changed them with another girl's eggs. From that act you can realize the character that her parents have created. So, in the end of the 6th grade most of the kids had rejected me.

With these girls I was attending after school lessons as well -English etc- and because we were having classes together and the private school was in New Moudania, we were going together with their parent's car. Once they planned to leave 10 minutes earlier and they left me waiting. After that I went to her mother's house, who lived near the meeting place and she told me that the girls had already left. So, their parents knew and stayed idle. Eventually my uncle took me there. They were surprised when they saw me; it was indescribable. They told me that they were looking for me and they could not find me and a bunch of excuses.. Another time they told me that their mobile had broken down. Then I understood that this was the last straw. They explained how their parents always do their transportation duties and my dad had never taken us. I had already told them though, that my own dad couldn't do that and if there was a problem they should have come straight up and let me know. They didn't trust him too, they were too spoiled to rely on an Albanian....Worse things happened at school when they would take my art album and write "ALBANIA" inside. We used to leave this album at school under our desk and draw things while being there. There were some pages of mine in there and they would tag them with the word "ALBANIA". I didn't realise it for a while and one girl saw that I wasn't irritated due to my ignorance and took the album by herself under the desk saying: "what is that? who could have done that?" She would also throw herself on me or stomp her feet etc.

I was very careful with my books and notebooks as I wanted to have them all completed and once they had taken my notebook of physics, and they had hidden it. I was sad that I didn't have it. I asked for a new one from the teacher and I spent a week to do the exercises again from scratch and after a week when I was finished they went to the library and they pulled it out and said "Oh, this is the one you were looking for" and I said "thank you so much but you can keep it now as I don't need it any more".

Q: What happened with the flag? Eventually they didn't give it to you, did they?

A: No, they gave it to me because the law says that during the first celebration on the 28 of October it is held by the best student and during the second celebration on the 25 of March by the second one.

I had already started to realize that I was being kicked out and one day while playing with my smaller brother I found out that he was being bullied .So I yelled at him and told him to come to the supermarket with me .But the kids followed him and they started blaming him because they thought that his actions were wrong and that he shouldn't have left the game in the middle. They were split in two different teams and they surrounded us so that they could bully us. We were very sad when we arrived home and my mom wasn't there. She was at the neighbor's house and we were still afraid.

Q: So they scared you?

A: YES ! YES !

Q: Did they push you?

A: Yes, they pushed us against the wall and that scared us a lot.

Q: Were they yelling at you?

A: I don't remember. The only thing I remember is the fear we felt.

And then I went to highschool. The same person was talking really bad for me and she was saying that we don't have a lot of money and that we don't get dressed with nice clothes etc. One day she met me in the street and in front of everyone she asked me "why are you wearing the same clothes again?"

Q: You are laughing now but she hurt you a lot and you still remember it.

A: I can't forget it and I can't get over it.

Q: Did you answer? What did you tell her?

A: No it would make no difference.

Q: When did you leave the village?

A: When I was 15 years old.

Q: Did you finish high school there? Which high school did you go to?

A: To the one in the nearby village.

Q: How were things there? Did you have any problems?

A:No.I didn't have a problem. The guys were calm, so there was no rivalry.

Q: What about the teachers?

A: I didn't have any problems. I never had any problems with the teachers, only with one specific teacher in primary school. I remember I started crying when I saw my grades and my mother asked the teacher why I got 9 in some specific subjects and his answer was "if she doesn't like it, she must study more".

Q: What about high school, did you have any problems?

A: No. In high school I felt a bit bad because I would reconnect with the people I had "delete" from my life because we didn't keep in touch and luckily we weren't in the same classes.

Q: Except for the kids who lived in the same village, did you face any discriminative behavior from your classmates?

A: No.

It made me sad when a classmate told me something. He said that we (the immigrant) are the reason they don't have jobs and I asked him "What jobs? Would your father go and work for your neighbour for 30€?" He said, "Yes he would". The neighbor would ask your father first and then mine.

Q: Did you discuss this at class?

A: Yes we did. It happened when I was at secondary school but at that time I was mature enough to answer.

Q: Now that you are in the university have you seen something similar happening?

A: No, they ask where I come from because of my name but that's all.

Q: How much do you think it has affected you that you are an immigrant?

A: It has affected me a lot because sometimes I believe I don't belong here. I am very lucky because my friends don't make me feel like a foreign person. The girls that I live with, my friends and my classmates don't make me feel that way.

Q: One question that is the most common to all the immigrants here: Do you feel that you don't belong here?

A: No, I feel I don't belong there. I remember that we discussed this in my class and one of my classmates asked me about this. He said that he feels like a foreign here and when he goes there (in Albania) he feels the same. I hadn't felt that, when I was there. I felt good. But now that I had grown older and realized some things I understood that whenever I went to Albania I was feeling that I was going to a mini-trip and by the time I passed the border I felt like I was coming back home but now I feel that here is my home for sure.

Q: Some, say that immigrants of the second generation are with two legs, one here and one there.

A: I still feel that I don't belong in that same mentality as the people who are here.

Q: Does this make you feel liberated?

A: I hadn't realised it but now that you mentioned it, yes.

Q: The third generation migrants are perfectly integrated in this new way.

[...]

Q: Do you speak any Albanian?

A: A little bit. They barely understand me.

Q: What about your brother?

A: A little bit. Almost none.

Q: What language do you speak with your mother?

It's funny that with my dad I speak only Greek; we don't choose. It is just the way we do. With my mother I try to speak Albanian, not all the time, because I'm not used to this way. My mother speaks Albanian with all the members of my family and my brother speaks Greek to her and she replies in Albanian but they understand each other somehow.

Q: Does your mother search for work and deal with the employers?

A: She does but the deal is always made by my father for the payment and the reason is that she hasn't learned to speak good Greek.

Q: We should come to your house and film the way you communicate! Would you like to go back to Albania?

A: I don't know. I know the conditions of living there are very difficult, economically, politically and socially. It's not a country that I see my future life in any way. So I don't have any reasons to go back. I don't reject that I have roots

from there. It is a bit weird because when someone asks me where I come from, if I say only Chalkidiki it will sound weird. That is why I say that I grew up in Chalkidiki but I was born in Albania.

Q: You know, your name, Iliana D., doesn't sound like an Albanian one. Did you get your name here?

A: Yes, because my father, when he came here in Greece, before my mom's pregnancy, he was working for a woman called Iliana who was very beautiful, almost amazing, so when he found out that the first child was a girl he said that her name was gonna be Iliana.

Q: Your brother has an Albanian name. He was named after his grandfather. Right?

A: Yes, from his grandfather.

Q: But he will face more often the question "where are you from?" because of the name.

A: Yes, more often.

Q: Now that he is going to join the army how does he feel? Is he afraid?

A: Yes, he is scared because he didn't study something and he is generally scared about his future. He is also considering the prospect of going out again, to another country, immigrants again, because we have friends in England who tell him that in Greece with the salary of a waiter you do nothing and he regrets not having studied in University. While in England you can make a living with a simple job and a basic salary.

Q: What about BREXIT?

A: Nobody knows. My cousin now, having made the decision to go, works as a waitress, but it's a different life there.

Q: Maybe because he thinks he'll be better there and help you out as well.

A: My brother is young and he is still immature. He has not studied any English, of course, but I think he will learn it easily. Now of course he regrets not having studied and learning English. But it strikes me that he regretted it so quickly because I know the kids are sorry for their mistakes but shortly after 20. He realized that he was wrong really soon. Now he is thinking of leaving, at least for temporarily to put some money aside and then maybe come back. I will have graduated from University too and I will be a doctor with a permanent job. I will be able to help too.

Q: Now that you mentioned that, will you have a problem because of your nationality? Do you have an ID?

A: Yes, I have a Greek identity. I will normally be appointed in a hospital. What I never found out is whether I could work in military medicine because I was thinking about it. I never found out but there might have been nationality problems to work as a military doctor.

Q: Do you regret now that you did not follow military medicine?

A: There were some pros, that you are offered accommodation and you don't have to spend money on renting a room. You also have 200 Euros a month, which is a great help to students. Now I am finishing my medical studies for good. I will see what specialties are offered and what waiting period there's in order to find a job. But I will look for a job abroad, maybe England or Germany. England is the one I prefer most because I know the language.

Q: In Germany, however, those of our students who went to work as doctors are very pleased.

A: Yes, in Germany there are very good medical facilities and they need doctors. They consider Greek doctors to be good.

Q: What can stand in the way of making these dreams come true for your future?

A: Initially, I want to finish my school because now that I have started working it is a little difficult to study at the same time and I know that next year I will not be able to do so. This makes me a little bit stressed, but in the worst case, taking my degree can take no more than six months. There are no more scholarships, I can't get benefits because I am working and I am no longer eligible to financial benefits. It doesn't matter that I'm a migrant but it's financial issues and bureaucracy that get in the way. It is a great relief to have a Greek identity, many opportunities can appear as I am a European citizen now. As an Albanian non-member of the European Union, and now with the veto Macron has put to Albania's membership I would have little chance of realizing my plans in Europe.

Q: But this is an internal dispute between France and Europe, I read today at Euronews. There were a lot of harsh statements made and so many sacrifices were made by the people, both Greeks and Albanians, that things should not have been done that way.

A: To be honest Albania is not ready to join the European Union.

Q: Why, was Greece ready when she became a member ?

A: It was not, of course, I know all the financial data was fictitious but Albania is in a much worse situation. It supports its drug economy. I've been to my places and seen some five-storey apartment buildings. Where did the money come from and all that was done?

Q: It doesn't mean anything. Turkey has been in the process of accession for 20 years. That could give you a hope, an incentive. It's unacceptable to block the way to Europe. The government should do strict drug testing, prepare the ground, not being excluded so fast.

A: Because if people lose the motivation to improve themselves, they lose their way for sure.

Q: In what ways has migration made you a stronger person?

A: After high school I got to know myself better, I gained self-awareness, confidence, and I take diversity as something good, not necessarily different. I felt it very much this summer when I was working. They were some tourists around. One was probably from Romania and asked me "where are you from?" And I answered "from Albania". Then he told me "it looks like you are different from those working around here". At first it kind of annoyed me, it made a negative impression on me but then I realized that he meant it in a positive way and made me feel good for the first time.

Q: How do you see other people who are different in any way around you? Do you feel close to them?

A: Yes, very much. I have understood that we must not blame anyone. Everyone is free to do what he wants. I will look at the person and his character and if we agree, if the conversation goes well, I have nothing else to think about. To exclude a person, because he has an origin or a sexual orientation different from mine, doesn't apply to me. No. While my parents are quite narrow minded because they grew up in Albania, I have no such issues, it's something that doesn't concern me. If I like a person, if he is a right man, I am not interested in anything else. I've met gays, let's say, and we do a good job together. It doesn't even cross my mind to think of something negative.

This has helped me to accept diversity as well. And to love it in the end, because I'm different as each of us is different.

If everyone could even feel for a second when doing an offensive comment how the other person felt, everything would be better. Not just for immigrants, for everybody. When we make a comment to deliberately tease someone, it is very bad. Doing it unwittingly, we can discuss about it, solve it, and end it. There is also a word I learned from you "empathy". Getting into the other's place, understanding what it feels like. Understand that the other person has not come here to disturb you, neither to disturb your privacy, nor to take anything that belongs to you. He came here for a better future for himself and his children. And understand that the best thing to do is to accept him as he is. And for some people that do not change their mind, I just want them at least try not to do harm others on purpose.

Q: Is that what you expect from the people who welcome you to a country? To try to make your life a little easier?

A. That's exactly it. And if they can't or don't want to, at least not try to make it harder.