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I Could Boast Myself that I Succeed in Adapting to Almost Anything

Chiara Louise Gosden
England

My name is Chiara Louise Gosden, and I was born in Italy in 1982 – my father was working there in those days. My parents are English; my father worked in Italy for two years and after two years we left for England again where we stayed two years too. When I was four, his company opened a branch in Belgium and my father was sent there; so we joined him. His job was in Brussels and we stayed in a village in the beginning, somewhere at the outskirts of the city; it was called Omless and it was in the Flemish side of Brussels. Then he was made redundant but he didn't want to go back to England because my parents were very fond of Belgium – they were fond of the Belgium way of being and also of the city and decided to rest there. I have an elder sister and two younger ones. We are four sisters. So we rested there...

I attended a school in French, I spoke English at home and I learned Dutch Flemish which I have been learning since the third grade. It was a state school, and I got accustomed well because I had been there since I was four and my sister since she was seven. We stayed in Brussels until the age of eighteen, that is all my life... I think I am more Belgium than English. In fact I really don't know what it means to be English. They say that the English are very proud for being English; it doesn't matter what I really am.

I don't know if I start now to feel I am Romanian but I like eating polenta with cheese... I feel well in the country too, I have no problems... I don't have that feeling of patriotism, that I am English or something else... But if I were, as they say, to give up my life for my country, although I don't think it is worth giving your life for any country, I think I ought to give my life for England because I am English legally and that's written in my passport.

I attended primary school for six years and then I attended high-school for some other six years and then I came in Romania for a year. After graduating high-school I interrupted my studies for one year, coming to Pașcani, Romania and I worked as a volunteer with a children's home. So I came to Romania when I was eighteen. I stayed here at Agape, a children's home which is in a way connected to the church of Christians according to the Gospel, in Pașcani. My purpose was to teach English to the children and learn Romanian because I wanted to continue my education learning Romanian perfectly and then to come and work with homeless children, to work here after graduating. I could have chosen another place but... In 1994, I think, my grandfather died and we went to his funeral in England and there I met a Romanian, pastor Ioan and his interpreter who was speaking both English and

French. I and my sister started to speak with him and we kept in touch, we wrote to each other... The pastor did not know French but he was sitting a faculty exam in English and French and he needed help so we wrote to each other.

Once, on Easter Day, I was in the tenth form, I had the chance of coming to Maramureș, Romania. There was a close friendship between that village in Maramureș and us: we brought them notebooks, ballpoint-pens, coffee, T-shirts... So, the very first time when I came to Dragomirești, Romania I was in the tenth form. Dragomirești was a very, very small village which had established a close friendship with Nivelles, a little town near Brussels and I had heard by chance, at church, that there was one place left, as there was somebody who couldn't come any longer – it had been postponed because of this – just enough time to get my visa, because you needed a visa then to visit Romania. I remember having stayed for ten days, that is I stayed in Maramureș for a week, then I left for Vatra Dornei and I went to the parents of the boy who had been the interpreter of the Baptist Church pastor in England. I met their pastor who was from Vatra Dornei again and I stayed there for three days, enjoying every minute of it.

Then I went to Maramureș again. I liked the children in Maramureș very much. It was at Easter and it was holiday. The children used to play in the street and when they saw a car they shouted: „There's a car! There's a car!“ but I, who was familiar with everything we had... I was very, very fond of them and knowing the rumors going the round – that there were 10-20 abandoned children in each room, that they had nothing to eat – I had never seen such a report, but I had heard very many rumors with others and I told them that I wanted to come to Romania as a volunteer. That is why I had never thought of another country. And there I was. My parents agreed. I had known nothing about Romania before coming in the tenth form. I knew this country existed as I had learned at geography but I didn't know anything else. I didn't

know anything either of Ceaușescu or Eminescu. I knew of Nadia Comăneci but I didn't associate her name with Romania but with the Olympic Games, with gymnastics, not at all with Romania. I knew about Dracula too but I didn't know that it had something in common with Romania. I knew he was from Transylvania but I didn't connect it with Romania.

What made me then come to Maramureș was the meeting with that interpreter and the fact that I wanted to run away from home in that period because the Easter holiday was near and if I hadn't run away from home I had to learn for the end of year exam and I didn't want that. I wanted to go to my sister in England but my mother didn't agree; I wanted to go to the seaside in Belgium, to my friend's parents but mother didn't agree either; I wanted to go to Paris with my friend's parents and mother kept telling: No and no. When it was about Romania although I didn't want to ask because I was sure she would say no again, I still asked and she said yes and then I left quickly for fear that she should change her mind. Later on I asked my mother why she had agreed and she answered that she didn't know why. She just told me: *I agree but ask your father too*. Father asked me: *What has your mother told you?* Mother agreed. *Then go*. So it was coincidence or God's will as you like it... That's how I came to Romania when I was 18.

I got to the children's home in Pașcani due to some acquaintances. So I stayed in Vatra Dornei for a month, I got terribly bored and that guy knew somebody in Suceava who had somebody, who, in his turn knew somebody in this home... So from church to church. I stayed with the home in Pașcani for ten months in 2000; I graduated high-school in 2000 and I spent August in Vatra Dornei and I got to the children's home on the 4-th of September. But what I found there disappointed me because I wanted to come to Romania to work with these children in need, children who have problems. I thought I would go to buy bananas for them because I thought

they didn't have any fruit, that I would go with them for a walk about the town, I thought they might be 20-30 in a room, I thought I would never be able to have my own room, that I would never be able to lock the door and I thought I might have things stolen, I had indulged into illusions. I thought that I wouldn't have liked to have my passport stolen to be able to leave.

When I got I found a Christian home. There were two children in a room, plentiful meals... It was not what I wanted, I wanted to be helpful. I taught English and French there and the children wanted that but they were rather spoiled. They wanted to learn French in the beginning but then when they understood that they had to work hard, that Chiara didn't only do their homework and that's all, they wouldn't want to learn. I wanted to feel helpful but I felt useless there. I stayed, I ate their food, I used their water... I had even thought of changing the home, to go somewhere else, somewhere where I should be helpful but in the end I didn't change it any longer. I wrote a letter to my people at home asking them what to do; they answered me to stay there where God had sent me, to stay here and learn the language and then to go to another home but only after I had been able to speak. And I learned the language quickly until Christmas. On Christmas I went to Bucharest and I had to explain something to the airport and I was alone and that lady was astonished. I was making mistakes but I could make myself understood and in my turn I could understand perfectly. Later on I improved here and there but I still don't speak perfectly.

After the ten months I returned to England but in the meanwhile I met Cătălin; I had seen him about Christmas but I was not interested in a relationship in Romania; I knew there were five months till my departure. He kept coming to me, asking me for books in English to read and I lent him books.

Cătălin: There, at that home, we played table-tennis. There was a time when we played from about noon till midnight. But I was looking for a

way of getting closer to her because I was very fond of her. I saw her reading and then I thought of asking her to lend me a book. Then I tried to speak to her, apologizing that I hadn't brought her book back.

Chiara: We started talking at about the beginning of February and we talked about our future. I had already enrolled with a faculty in England because you have to enroll a year before. I had enrolled on Christmas when I was in the 12-th form and I enrolled for a program a year later. So I had my place but I informed them that I would leave for Romania for a year to learn the language better. I was to attend the Faculty of Letters as I might say but here it's something else. It is called Foreign Language Department, University College of London and the faculty is called the Faculty of East European and Slavic Studies; so I told him that I would study in England for four years and I would come back to get married. The third academic year is a year of practice with us, so I would have studied six months in Romania and six months in Russia. I had enrolled with Romanian and Russian. Romanian because I didn't want to forget it and I wanted to improve it grammatically as I already spoke it and Russian not to get bored if I had studied only Romanian. That was the purpose and Cătălin agreed. But we thought of bringing him to England too, to get a degree in London and he was accepted by the faculty but he needed £18,000 a year. We didn't have that sum of money. The tuition fee was £6,000 and he needed also some money to live on; I had already found a free lodging. I could find nobody to help him; we tried to find a scholarship but they didn't have any. He could have sung in the University choir and that would have meant £1,500 a year but it wasn't enough.

Cătălin: I hoped I would go to England and that's why I hadn't enrolled anywhere else. The enrollment would finish at 1:00 p.m. on Friday and I was handing in my file with the faculty at 12:00. I knew I had a good mark and I enrolled only with that faculty where there was an Eco-

nomics Informatics department.

Chiara: We parted for the first time for six months; I left Romania in July and we didn't see each other till 16 December when my parents sent him money to come to us in Belgium; I was really amazed by my parents' reaction. I think they understood it was something serious. He came to us and stayed for a month. We used to chat on the internet and I phoned him every other week. When he came to us on Christmas he tried to convince me to study in Romania. I didn't agree because having started a faculty in England, the English degree is anyway better than the Romanian one, as the studies are easier being more interesting and more useful. Many subjects studied in Romania are useless. In England I had 13 classes a week, 1-2 books to read every other week. I told him I wanted to get through it not to start something and let the matter drop. I didn't know how my parents would react. I thought that it would not be well and if we said in the beginning that we would wait for four years then we had better do that.

And he came back and three other months elapsed till Easter when I had a month holiday and I came to Romania for two weeks (I stayed two weeks at home) and then I decided to come to Romania as it was too difficult, because a long distance separated us and I said we might either part or I should come to Romania because we could no longer live apart. It was difficult for me to find good reasons on Christmas, but, after three months on Easter, I myself decided that it would be better for me to come. Anyway if I was thinking of settling in Romania after graduating faculty, why should I stay longer? When my parents learned about it they reacted like me on Christmas. They said that an English degree was better, that nobody admitted a Romanian degree if I wanted to leave Romania and work somewhere else and advised me to wait longer, but finally they didn't say anything. What counted more was the fact that my father wanted to attend a faculty but his mother sent him to another and he didn't know about it, he just learned

that he was no longer enrolled with the faculty he wanted to attend. I think this is the reason why he wanted us to choose what we wanted to do in life. Then I discovered that the tuition fee would be bigger. In England I had to pay £1,000 a year as a British citizen and in Romania I was to pay 3,100 a year as a foreign citizen. But I compared the boarding fees and my father said that the difference wasn't too much and if I really wanted that I would...

And I came in October 2002. I was the only one to ask for a transfer and those in London looked through the papers to know what to do. The same thing happened in Romania. Foreigners come here with scholarships for only six months. The officials in London advised me to think twice as there was a small faculty and we knew each other's names and they sent me to an adviser to whom I explained why I wanted to leave. When I came for the first time I asked the Dean what department I should go to. He told me that, having a transfer, I had to go to the same department Russian-Romanian or Romanian-Russian. I chose Russian-Romanian and he told me that if I changed departments I had to sit a lot of exams. Before Christmas I learned that I had 17 exams to sit because they hadn't validated anything. They merely told me that they would validate my exams if I gave them the previous register sheet. I had put it in the file but those in the secretariat hadn't even looked in the file. They told me that I was the one to go to look for the professors. It seemed terrible to me because if they had told that to me in September it would have been something else, but to tell me one month before the exams and to give me a sheet of paper: here you are, there are 17 exams you have to sit besides the 9-10 exams you normally have to sit... It's very badly organized!

They have finally validated all my exams with Russian but no exam with Romanian because I had studied Romanian as a foreign language and the students here had studied it as a native language. They had studied a lot of things I had

never heard of in my life. I still have to pass an exam from the first year at school-psychology which they told me I had to sit.

We got married in December 2002 and we rented a one-roomed flat in Frumoasa.

If you want to know how education in Romania seemed to me in comparison with the one in London I should say that there are too many classes. I have 26 classes a week here and I had 13 classes a week in London, much too many useless classes, things which don't help us speak the language. I think that if I study a language I study it to speak it not to learn its history, although a little of general culture is harmless. It seemed to me that I could speak Russian better after the first year in London than I speak now after the second year. I had been for a month in Russia, I was making mistakes, but I could make myself understood. They organized a month in Russia at the end of the first year and half a year during the third academic year. Here I can leave during the semester with a scholarship and when coming back all the exams in Russian are validated but not the ones in Romanian. Nobody has classes there in the third year, so you don't miss anything and you don't have to recover anything but here you have to recover a lot of things.

I could boast that I succeed in adapting myself to almost anything. I don't miss the luxury at home... I have found a very good hostess who allowed us to do all the changes we wanted, so we made a hole in the wall for the washing machine and for the water heater because there is no hot water in that district. My father supported me both there and here and I haven't started working yet.

The strangest things over here seemed to be the homeless dogs because there are very many in the street and they would follow you. You can hardly see a homeless dog in Brussels, perhaps if you go somewhere in a district, but here they are everywhere, it doesn't depend on district, it depends on the dog and where he feels like walking. I am also annoyed by the organization of the

faculty, of its secretariat; in fact it seems to me a lack of organization. In England I was told that in December I had to sit this and that exam because, if you change the profile you sit the same exams. They should have told me: look, you will have the school psychology exam in the first year. Here they didn't tell me anything until I asked. I didn't know that I had to pay for the extra exams until a fellow student didn't tell me that she had received a notification letter to pay, or otherwise she would be expelled! You have to ask because you won't learn anything if you don't and this seems difficult for me.

Another thing I got harder used to are the shops, they are amusing in a way; I mean the shops where the goods are somewhere on shelves behind counters. Especially when it is about clothes. You have a look at the clothes from a distance and the shop assistant looks at you. For example- you see a folded pullover. You don't know if it has a pattern or not. You ask for it, you unfold it and you notice that there is a pattern on it and you hand it back. And you say: „I would like to see the pink one too“. „Which one, this one?“ „No, lower.“ „This one?“ asked the shop assistant. „No, to the right.“ Finally she finds it and gives it to you. But you don't like it. You feel ashamed that you don't like it and you have to disturb her. But in the meanwhile you see a T-shirt that winks at you. You can't help and ask for it! „Yes, right away. Don't you need the pullover any longer?“ the shop assistant asks you sharply. You don't like the T-shirt either. What shall I do, I ask myself: shall I buy it because I am ashamed or shall I give it back and not set foot in this shop again? Difficult question... So, any time I see a counter and the goods behind it and a shop assistant, I turn back from the door.

I have been terrified by the retail sale because you can't buy just one cigarette. Well, I could go with Catalin and share with him but how should I go there to ask for two things or batteries or articles for personal use. I asked my father too: what shall I do? Shall I go and buy by

piece, one piece taken out of a packet? My father wrote me to buy a whole packet, to check it to be sealed, because you never know. When you see things displayed on counters or in windows you might be given the one in the window – this seems very strange to me. Well, I understand that people buy according to their possibilities. You see that you don't have enough money this month, you buy the next month, and yet it is still strange to me. Or buying wholesale, it is with us too, but for candies, not coffee or pasta. But I like this because you can see and buy if you like. If you don't like anything, then you throw the whole packet with us.

Many things have shocked me. When I first entered the kitchen of the children's home, there was a cut hen, it didn't have a head or legs, they were in the sink and somebody wanted to take out its viscera. I saw hen only in shop fronts... Well, I didn't live in the country and I guess the one who has poultry in his yard does the same. I visited another lady and her daughter was scaling a fish. I entered, I saw and I walked out... I saw blood, I felt sick. How can people do such things? There were many things in the beginning and I would write my mother lots of pages. I think she has kept those letters. My mother is an English teacher with a private school belonging to the Medicine Faculty, father works with the European Commission in the field of science and research and he travels very much to present the research which is offered now by the European Commission.

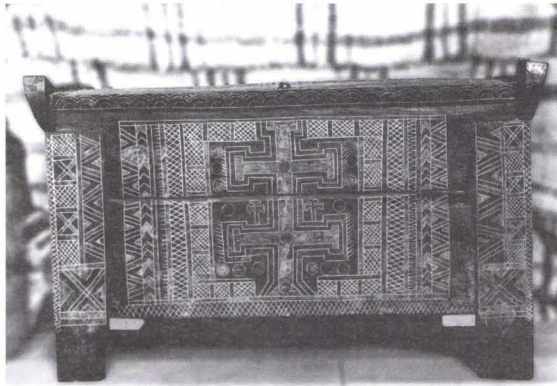
I have learned to cook. I even didn't know

what mother used for her sauces; I didn't know to make one. Catalin's sister taught me to cook. When I used to tell my mother that I didn't know what I would do, as I couldn't cook, she would tell me: *Well, can you cook? Yes, you can cook.* That's what I do even now, if I want to cook an English dish, I open the cook book and I prepare it, but I need an English cook book.

Cătălin: Yes, if you use a Romanian cook book you have to taste all the time, wait that I need I don't know what.

Chiara: How should I know its taste?

Chiara: In the English cook books they write 253 grams of flour and then 253 grams of... In the Romanian books they write... at a suitable temperature, what does suitable mean? We use degrees, you heat to 180 degrees. I sent my mother a recipe like that: you put it at a suitable temperature. Well,



well we shall use a temperature she told me she could understand because when she was little and my grandma was alive, things were the same: medium, big or little heat, that is a suitable temperature. When I told her that the bathroom was at the back of the garden and that was dark till I got there because there wasn't a bulb... mother told me: if I sent this letter to grandma she will know for sure what it is about because she grew up in the same conditions. I told her: so I live the life my grandma, who is now 60 or 70, lived. When I was in Maramures the toilet was a sort of a little house but the timber at the back were not to the ground and the hens could get in. I was thinking: Lord, what shall I do? They did not have running water they came with

a pail from the well. When I washed in the morning, I thought of waiting a little longer until the water got warmer. Then I had the first shock, because I had never imagined that something like that could exist. It seemed unlikely to be. It seemed to be the atmosphere of fairy tales or one which existed in the remote past. My parents like stuffed cabbage very much and they always ask us to make some more and when we leave Romania we take vine leaves with us and make them there, I wrap them up, I am patient because I'm on holiday.

It was very difficult at the beginning of our marriage. The first 2-3 months were the most difficult, but I don't know now because I passed over difficulties and solved them. I have told you about those who lasted longer; we have been married for two years and four months. The first three months were terrifying for me. I would cry every evening, every day, it was very difficult, but I don't remember them now; football was one of them.

Cătălin: Friends, I had a lot of friends and she was alone.

Chiara: I had nobody except her sister. He would call on Adi, he went to play football or to meet somebody while I had nobody, I didn't have anywhere to go, and I had no friends. I think we would have divorced in the first three months if we hadn't been Christians. My mother had told me that the first three months of her marriage were superb and after that it went from top to lower and I asked myself, that if those were the superb months, how low could I go after that? It seems it is the other way round with us.

A real problem for me was the fact that the people in Cătălin's family would eat when they were hungry. As they passed through the kitchen they ate, taking what they could from the table. *Why?* I would ask. *Well, I have just passed through the kitchen and I was hungry or I felt like eating or...* We have breakfast at 7, a little chocolate or a biscuit and a cup or two of tea at about ten – you can have tea as much as you

like, but only a biscuit or two, depending on the size of the biscuit, if it was big or small- we have lunch at about 12:30 or 13:30; we have tea and a biscuit at about 4:00p.m. and we have dinner at 5:30p.m. or 6:00p.m., and that's all. When Catalin went to the kitchen he ate something; when thinking: *What shall I do now? Oh, I am hungry;* he ate something... *Haven't I given you to eat, don't you have food? Yes, I do, but I'm hungry! Well, eat something of that dish! Well, but I don't want that dish, I would like to eat something else! How's that, you haven't finished your plate of pasta, yet and you don't want pasta any more?...* Now we have turned to the Romanian style of eating, that is, when I see him eating I eat too, just to be together.

Cătălin: We were a lot in the family, we were 5 brothers and mother would make a pot of broth which would finish in no time, or French fries which had the same fate. She had to prepare something else too, for us to be satisfied. We would never eat the same thing twice. When you entered the kitchen two hours later mother was already preparing something else. If we ate a little we would feel hungry quickly and we entered the kitchen again; so we ate a little but several times a day. There was always something to do and we could never gather at a certain time to have a meal. We ate when we could. It was only on Sunday that we gathered and had lunch together.

Chiara: I was amazed by their punctuality.

Cătălin: I couldn't understand in the beginning why I had to be punctual, why I had to be at a certain time, why I had to tell where I went and when I came back, I couldn't...

Chiara: Mother would ask me: *when do you leave, where do you go, what time do you come back?...* write down in the note book when you leave and what time you come back. *When you come back you tell me: I have come back; when leaving you tell me: I have left, I am getting out.* It seemed to me strange too in the beginning, I could say: I'm leaving at two, and to have left at two, but she said: *no, you come and tell me I*

have left, I have come, you come and tell me: I have just entered. What's the use of it, I asked? If the house is on fire and I don't know who is in the house. I go to the third floor to save you and you are somewhere else. And being used like that, when I leave, I say where I go. But Cătălin went to play football: When do you come back? I don't know. Well, you play football from four till when? I don't know. When do you come back? He came back at about 9p.m. Have you played football from four to nine? No, I haven't. I went to drink a beer with the boys. Well, but I was at home. Or to say: I will be back by seven and to come back at 11:00p.m. Haven't you told me that you will come back at seven? I had prepared dinner by 7, a hot dish nicely arranged, when I saw that he hadn't come back by 9, I put the food in the fridge and I went to bed. He came back at eleven and asked: have you prepared anything? Should I get up and warm up the food? Look for something in the fridge. Punctuality is still a problem.

Cătălin: What still astonishes me is the fact that she won't stop until not finishing what she has thought of doing; I do something, I rest a little, I resume, I rest a little...

Chiara: I was astonished by the fact that he sleeps at noon. Mother told me even when I was at the kindergarten: you shall not sleep at noon. I came home exhausted; I went to bed at seven

and slept till the next day at 6. Some other children used to sleep at noon but mother told me: Chiara goes out into the courtyard and plays with the other children. Only babies have to sleep at noon. After having married Catalin, I saw that he would go to bed at 2p.m. What are you doing? I'm going to bed. How can you sleep at 2p.m.? Why not? It's our habit. But what do you do if your program is from 9a.m. till 7p.m.? Where do you sleep? Do you sleep on a desk?

Catalin: I still remember that my grandpa in the country would sleep between 1-3p.m.

Chiara: Money administrating is another problem. We have a budget and a certain amount of money assigned for each sort of expenses. The idea of having a budget for income and expenses was my father's. Ever since attending the faculty, father told me: I will give you 600 a month, school costs..., the youth hostel costs..., clothes, transport, food, pocket money. Now you divide. In fact, the addition was only for him, to know how much he should give me. If I told him that there wasn't enough for something and I didn't have where to take from the other chapters he would give me. He checked if I had told the truth and he would send me. I would like Cătălin to be as disciplined as I am.

Interview by Dana Lungu and Dan Lungu
Translated by Mihaela Georgescu

