



MIGRANTS IN THE SPOTLIGHT MEDIA AWARD

SECOND PLACE WINNER

The reality behind the exotic façade: An immigration story

by *Cristina-Elena Staicu*

Think of Peru! Think of a young Peruvian boy playing a soothing song with a *zampoña* (traditional Peruvian panpipe), wearing a blue *poncho* and a *chupas* (traditional Peruvian bag), in which he carries his flutes. Picture his figure, with straggly coal-like hair, calm, pitch-black eyes and an earring with a small silver feather dangling in his ear. Feel the beats of his percussion instrument, the rhythm of the Amazonian jungle itself. Now place this boy in the concrete capital of an East-European country, Romania, to be more precise. Quite a big discrepancy, isn't it?

Snow isn't for the faint-hearted

Peter Messa (22) is a young Peruvian musician who came to Romania with his entire family almost three years ago. He is part of the Sin Fronteras band (Without Frontiers), alongside with his father and uncle and he is the youngest member of his family. The Embassy of Peru issued them an invitation to come here and perform spectacles which promoted the Peruvian traditional music and handicraft in Bucharest and Mamaia. The band had a huge success from the beginning and the handicrafts were very popular. But Peter had a very hard time adjusting to Romania and he is still struggling to adapt since he came here, in the winter of 2008.

Imagine an Eskimo leaving his comfortable igloo and stepping directly on a hot, sunny beach in Miami. He would have the same thermal shock (only the other way round) that Peter experienced when he first came to a wintry, ice-cold Romania. His reaction is understandable. He comes from Trujillo, the Peruvian town known as the City of Eternal Spring, where in the coldest day of a winter, the temperature doesn't go below 15 degree. It was the first time that Peter and his family had ever seen snow. "It was quite an interesting experience, but not pleasant at all", claims the young man. The transition was one of the hardest things he had to endure physically and he feels he "will never get used to the cold".

Bureaucracy stands in the way of successful integrations

The climate wasn't the only obstacle he had to overcome. He and his family had to deal with the bureaucratic process of getting residence and work permits. The process is even more tedious for non-



EU countries, such as Peru. For the Messa family, the situation was even more complicated because in Romania the handicraft work isn't standardized for non-EU citizens. "It was difficult to obtain documents. We had to run a lot to get them all. We had help from the Embassy too. We didn't know what documents we needed", remembers Peter.

They didn't know anything about this country when they came and the sources of information were scarce. The help of the Peruvian Embassy was very valuable for Peter's family, and eventually they managed to resolve their legal issues. But the legal part can sometimes be the easiest aspect of the integration process, when compared with the challenge of surviving in a new country, without any clue about its customs, people and tongue. The language was a difficult hurdle for all the members of the family. It was especially hard for Lili Messa, Peter's mother, and his grandmother, who even now knows only a few words in Romanian.

There are no Romanian language courses offered for immigrants by the authorities, unless you have an employer to pay for them. So, they had to face the ordeals of a job which presupposes communicating with people in a foreign language, entirely new to them. The easier part in the learning stages was the understanding as Peter's native tongue is Spanish, a language which has many vocabulary similarities with Romanian. The problem was pronunciation. "It was very hard with the accent and the weird sounds, the words with diacritical marks. It was very hard to pronounce", says Peter.

Preconceptions and cultural stereotypes lead to misjudgments

Establishing a bridge of communication wasn't the only challenge they had to face. There was always the issue of public perception. The street performance of Sin Fronteras and the ambulant stand exposes them to the Romanian people almost in the same way their handicrafts are exposed. Peter experienced many times the piercing gazes of those who find them derisive: "some people look at us as if they're watching circus freaks". In the eyes of the public they are the quintessence of exotic, a view which leads to many preconceptions and cultural stereotypes. This automatic label of exotic averts people from seeing beyond the colored costumes and getting to know the real person. The Romanians are fascinated by the Peruvians, but on a superficial level.

Peru is somewhat unknown in these lands. People know very little about its history, traditions and people. And there's the additional factor of Peruvian community being very small in Romania, so the contact between these nationalities is rear. Yet Romanians don't view Peruvians as threats, as they tend to see other immigrants which are more common here (Moldavian, Turkish and Chinese people) because the latter are the ones who can "steal" their jobs. So, the Peruvians are not associated with competition, considering there aren't so many of them. Peter feels that he and his family are the only Peruvians in the country. "We haven't encountered other fellow citizens. We're the only ones."

Even though Romanians didn't understand him, Peter tried to understand the Romanians. He read a lot about Romania's history, about Dacia and Stephen the Great and was impressed by it. However, he still felt that Peru's culture and history are a lot richer and diverse. The young man thinks that there are many cultural differences between the two countries, but many similarities as well. In Peter's opinion, the whole thing "is a matter of optic. You can choose to think we're different, or you can choose to think we're the same."

Hard work and determination made their business a success

Peter was pleasantly surprised when he discovered the Romanian folklore. For a passionate musician such as himself, it was a true revelation to listen to traditional Romanian music, play with flutes

and panpipes similar to his. He was attracted by the cheerful, vivid folkloric music, very different from his country's traditional softer music. Peter learned everything he knows from his family and the music school he attended back in Peru. In his performances with Sin Fronteras, he can play up to five instruments (different kind of flutes, percussion, and mandolin) within one song.

When he's not in concert with the band, Peter accompanies his mother with the mobile stand, which travels throughout Bucharest in order to reach as many people as possible. It is also cheaper to have a mobile stand than a permanent one. The effort is not in vain. The Romanians have been very receptive to the Peruvian art. The mobile stand is always surrounded by girls attracted by colorful handmade accessories and alluring music. Peter is in charge of the musical aspect, and his mother Lili Messa, deals with the customers always with a smile on her face. She makes a ritual out of every sell she makes, trying to make conversation with every person who looks around despite her poor Romanian.

Mrs. Messa tries to build a relationship with the customer by interacting with them, which leads to trust. She appreciates authenticity and she is very determined to keep the traditional values and standards in her family. All the materials are imported from Peru, and hand-made here by crafty women in the family. The collection includes necklaces made of bones, bracelets made of bamboo, earrings made of seeds and all sorts of rings. The selection of handmade objects is very wide and the prices are accessible for everybody.

When deepest roots make it impossible to adapt

Still, things aren't how they used to be. People admire more than they buy. Even though their financial situation isn't critical, the Messa family has to make some sacrifices in order to survive. For instance, Peter had to cancel his annual trip to Peru this year, although he was really looking forward to it. He misses his friends from back home as he doesn't have many friends here. That's not because he's unsociable but because the circumstances aren't right for him to create new relations. When he's not working, he's rehearsing and vice versa.

When asked if he's happy here, Peter didn't answer. He only smiled faintly, with a sad expression on his face. He wants to go back, no matter what. His big dilemma is that his family wants to obtain a permanent residency here. And yet, he's the only one who longs to go home. There are many reasons why moving here was and still is an ordeal for the young Peruvian: the language barrier, the cultural differences, the legal matters etc. But the real motive why Peter is still struggling to adapt is the fact that he didn't come here by choice. He had to follow his family and leave all his dreams at home. The change was too sudden and too abrupt and he had to assume a new identity as a foreigner in a European country. And that can be a heavy cross to bear.