

Jelena's story

Homecoming

You must be crazy”!- exclaimed my friend in Serbia during our regular call over Skype on a Sunday afternoon while sitting in my favourite cafe in Roppongi hills, after I told her that I have decided to come back to Serbia after spending 8 years living in Tokyo, Japan. It happened for the second time I was being told crazy. First time was in 2009. when my friends and I were spending weekend afternoon in our favourite cafe in Dorćol, Belgrade. I told them at the time that I will be moving to Japan in April, after I have graduated- Italian literature. It did sound crazy I must admit- but I got used to it after a while being called “crazy”- I decided to believe that what they actually mean is “brave”. Maybe.



I spent 8 fantastic, exciting and memorable years in Japan- years that shaped me as a professional and as a grown up. So much that I believe I will call Japan my second home country for the rest of my life. At this point, actually, Minato is the city where I lived longest if you consider that as a child of a military colonel and later divorced parents, I spent most of my childhood moving more or less every 5 years. When people in Serbia ask me which hood are you from I cannot give a simple answer.

Over the 8 years in Tokyo- I was fortunate to experience Japan from inside, in the years I witnessed the country slowly opening up to more foreign residents. In the first years the only supermarket that had English labels on products was National Azabu in Hiroo. Nowadays almost any supermarket in Minato has bilingual labels.

I worked as English teacher and taught Serbian home cooking classes. This gave me an opportunity to meet many people, some of them becoming very dear and close friends. My intimate goal was to, knowing that I will not spend the rest of my life in Japan- do whatever I can to promote Serbian culture so that people who come after me never face again the reaction: "Oh, you are from Siberia- it must be cold there!". From this perspective in life, I believe I gave my contribution. Almost 2000 students went through my cooking class. Over 100,000 people saw Serbian folk dances when we made a tour of KUD Branko Cvetkovic, several generations of students at



Tokyo University of Foreign studies dance Serbian folk dances as extra-curricular activity and the cookbook was printed in 2000 copies currently being sold in Amazon, Kinokuniya, Tsutaya bookstores, Rakuten. I saw Japanese Emperor from a step distance... But most of all, I received so much love in return from the people I encountered.



Indeed, it was a difficult decision to leave the country, but I trusted that future holds a different story for me.

And so, I found myself in January 2017 back in Belgrade. I almost forgot how cold and gray can winter mornings be- this is something I never missed. Winters in Tokyo are warm, sunny, clear and rarely windy. I always enjoyed being able to cycle around the city over all 4 seasons. Always hated public transportation in Belgrade, but I started enjoying the small, funny things.



Luckily- I was given in life this great ability to immediately focus on the bright side. I thought, what was the thing I most liked to do around Christmas and missed while I was away? Theatre! I opened the National Theatre Website and booked myself a seat in the Gala New Years Concert on January 13th, to celebrate the Julian New Year and the start of a whole new chapter in life.

Reconnect

The first month I spent my time as a tourist in my hometown doing the things I missed the most over the years. Wake up, go to the bakery and buy fresh pastry, get a newspaper and find a cozy cafe with a nice garden where I could read in peace. I visited old places that I used to love but discovered new ones. I was trying to put together how much has Belgrade changed over this time. It was great to know that now I can visit my grandparents and old friends when I

wanted to, but at the same time I was very sad that I left behind many close friends who stayed in Japan. I was experiencing something called a reverse culture shock.



After the honeymoon phase was over, I realised I was here to stay. I started teaching English in companies, as this was the easiest job I could get for starters. Though I earned just enough to cover basic expenses, I was happy to have a routine. It was a perfect time for investing into writing, so I worked very hard over 6 months to write and translate the cookbook that is today sold across Japan. Writing a book made it also easier for me to adapt and go through the cultural shock as I still felt as a bridge between the two countries- not quite out of Japan and not full in Serbia either. From this perspective that was the perfect time and space for it, and all



the people who invested themselves with passion to the project in their own way.

Homecoming was easier also because many friends were able to visit Serbia in 2017, 2018 and 2019 before corona. I was able to visit Japan once a year, as well. It makes me especially happy when I can introduce Japan from my perspective to my close friends who always wanted to travel there.

In the meantime, I used my time to travel across Serbia to all those places I wanted to go. Serbia indeed has beautiful nature and such a rich cultural heritage. In 2017. We have organised another cooking tour with students of Niki's kitchen and planned to do another for Serbia but corona has stepped on our way.



Professionally, I had a clear idea what I wanted to do- being passionate about education and technology I knew I wanted to dedicate my career to spreading knowledge and helping people reach their full potential. So, I started working

for AVON cosmetics where I designed online courses for independent sales representatives, as many as 30,000 of them. And, I learned how to use make up myself, finally :) After almost two years, I changed job and now I work for Bosch Power Tools as eLearning manager and work at the forefront of EdTech industry.

Cooking still remains my favourite hobby- sometimes my colleague Mateja, whose mom is Japanese and I give Japanese cooking classes to our colleagues in the company. I did a few cooking classes over Zoom with Niki's kitchen, but for this kind of activity it is a poor substitute for the face to face classes. Still, it is really wonderful being able to even in corona times we are able to cook together.

Building a life from a scratch is a difficult task. I sometimes feel it took a toll on keeping in touch with all the friends in Japan, due to the time difference and lack of time. When we finally get together, we realise how time flies so fast. It is especially difficult since from March 2020 as we are unable to travel.

Though Serbia, as Japan, and as every country in the world has its disadvantages- I enjoy my life here, surrounded by people I love and doing things I believe matter. Would I go back to Japan? Absolutely, if I could travel every year or spend some years again in the future working- I would be very happy. Do I plan to stop being crazy? Absolutely NOT! :)

To all of my friends in Japan- I miss you! I hope we can get back together really soon. In the meantime, stay safe and healthy and do the things that make you happy, without excuses :)

