

Love Beyond National Borders



By Velina Derilova

The American author and journalist Ambrose Bierce famously said in his satirical reference book, *The Devil's Dictionary*, that love is a temporary insanity curable by marriage. This sarcastic reinterpretation might sound a little too cynical but it certainly points to the fact that tying the knot does hide a challenge or two.

What is more, sometimes the plot points of the story might include an even trickier element. Imagine the result if, for instance, the usual marriage-related difficulties of compromising and putting up with the other person's queerness are combined with getting used to a whole new culture. It might get messy.

Marrying across national borders is something that people have been doing for thousands of years. In the past, soldiers, while posted abroad, often fell in love with local women and married them; these women were called "war brides." Members of

royal and aristocratic families were married off in different countries for political and other reasons, often forming surprisingly successful unions.

In the time of globalization and instant across-the-world communication, finding one's life partner in a foreign country or even continent is becoming not only easier, but also more likely. The nomadic lifestyle has never before been so tempting and accessible. More and more wanderers at heart find globetrotting jobs allowing them to come into contact with people of various social, economic and cultural backgrounds.

Diego Lucci, who teaches philosophy at the American University in Bulgaria (AUBG), met his wife, Branimira Lucci, two months after he had left Italy to continue his career here. Mrs. Lucci, who is a native of Blagovgrad—the town where her husband still works—was invited to a dinner party hosted by his landlord.

“Actually, her mom was one of the guests, but she couldn't come because of some other reasons so Branimira replaced her and that's how we met,” Lucci said. “She was the only person younger than 50 and the only one who spoke English so we *had* to talk to each other.”

It turned out their first conversation was the beginning of a beautiful friendship. “It was a lot of fun,” Mrs. Lucci said. “We used to talk for hours and I told him very intimate secrets without suspecting that he would turn out to be my life's partner.”

It was a similar story for Michael Cohen, an American professor of Literature and Lucci's colleague at AUBG. He was introduced to his Bulgarian wife, Rositsa, 20 years ago on a night out. Not speaking the same language didn't seem like a problem.

“It was a kind of love at first sight, I just saw her on the dance floor,” Cohen said. “I discovered that she was interested in film and a lot of the same things that I was and it was very romantic in the beginning because we didn't have that common language.”

With all couples, however, the initial sweet intoxication of falling in love is followed by a sobering period where the real getting-to-know-each-other process takes place. It's usually the time when transnational relationships are put to the test. Sometimes a seemingly small thing as eating habits can actually rock the boat.

The Chinese newspaper *People's Daily* reports that it is not uncommon for transnational marriages in China to end because of food issues. The edition cites some couples who admit the uncompromising attitude towards diets was the main reason leading to divorce.

Lucci admitted that as far as food was concerned, he and his wife also struggled at the beginning of their relationship. “[Since] Italian food is the best in the world,” he said, “whenever an Italian marries someone outside Italy, there would be this problem. Always.”

Mrs. Lucci confirmed. “In the beginning, [the problem] was the food because he’s Italian,” she said. “I couldn’t cook, especially Italian food, and he loves it.”

Later on, to her husband’s delight, she learned all about Italian cuisine. “So [now] it’s Italian [food that we eat] mainly but that’s fine because I like it too.”

Another problem a lot of transnational couples often face is the issue of citizenship. Changing it can be a long process and for some it is an ordeal of negotiating the laws and language of a new country.

In the United States federal law, the International Marriage Broker Regulation Act regulates international marriage, primarily to restrict misuse of the institution of marriage to immigrate to the country.

Zornitsa Stoyanova, a dancer, who went to an art college in the U.S. after finishing high school in Bulgaria and her husband, Greg Dunn, an artist, got married a little sooner than planned so that she could stay there. The couple, now living in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, admit it took them a while to figure things out.

“The biggest challenges were actually bureaucratic,” Stoyanova said. “This [entire process] was extremely difficult to navigate. We knew we loved each other, but we had a hard time talking about it and determining our true motivation for getting married.”

Even without the complexities of the red tape, a couple’s cross-cultural day-to-day interaction might feel quite daunting. For Cohen, being on time is a must, which isn’t necessarily the case with his wife.

“I think in America the clock is more like God,” Cohen said, “and in Bulgaria, there tends to be this laid back attitude about time and meetings. My wife is like that to the extreme.”

In order to cope with this problem, he has come up with a special approach for tricking his wife into being on time. “If we have to go somewhere together, I’ll usually lie about the time because I’m a time keeper,” Cohen said. “So for sure, I’ll be like, yeah, we have 15 minutes when we actually have 20 or 25 because I know she is going to push it right to the end.”

Lucci and his wife are struggling with another culture-specific problem. “If she [my wife] were Italian, she would not smoke so much,” Lucci said. “Italian people in general don’t smoke as much as Bulgarians. That’s the only thing I cannot stand in my wife.”

Stoyanova, on the other hand, finds it hard to come to grips with her husband’s somewhat idealized view on how the world functions. “He completely trusts the system and government agencies,” she said. “That’s something Bulgarians don’t have.”

Another specifically American feature, in Stoyanova’s opinion, is her husband’s belief in the goodness of all people and his desire to help them. “He would often donate money to some place in Africa,” she said. “I find it strange that he wouldn’t consider giving the same amount of money to the public school down the street that can’t pay its teachers.”

There are other cultural particularities that tend to be interesting and fun rather than annoying and hard to swallow. Mrs. Lucci, for example, said her husband’s most pronounced national characteristic is his penchant for being loud and expressive.

“The most Italian thing about him is his singing and his tendency to be loud,” she said. “He sings everywhere – in the shower, in the bedroom. There are times when I go, ‘Please, have a five minute break,’ but that’s the way they [Italians] are.”

Sometimes, linguistic specificities create comic moments that sound more like imaginary anecdotes than real-life situations. Cohen remembered a time a few months ago when his wife accidentally misused a word.

“It was the end of the semester and I was saying ‘I need some time to myself to decompress and let go,’ he said. “She [my wife] came back to me a little bit later and she’s just like, ‘Yeah, I understand, that’s cool, take the time to... decompose.’”

Despite the indisputable challenges it poses, having a partner outside one’s nationality allows for reevaluating what’s important in life and for really striving for it.

“Being married to a Bulgarian in some ways has made me more relaxed and laid back,” Cohen said. “I’m more focused on what’s important in terms of social interaction. She insists on having more people over to the house and though I bristle sometimes and get frustrated, I like it, it feeds my soul.”

Lucci admitted one of the things he likes most about his wife is the freedom she gives him. He sees Bulgarian women as more open-minded and with a softer approach to everything. The main advantage they have over Italian women, in his opinion, is the fact that they are less family-obsessed.

“When you get married to an Italian woman, you don’t get married to a woman only,” Lucci said. “You get married to an entire family and it’s too many obligations towards too many people. It’s like in the movie ‘My Big Fat Greek Wedding.’ We are the same!”

It turns out, however, that at the end of the day, the human rather than the cultural factor is what lies at the heart of a transnational marriage. That’s most likely why the whole enterprise doesn’t seem like mission impossible.

“I cannot possibly imagine being married to someone else,” Stoyanova said. “He is the other half of me, who was born on the other side of the globe. He just is the person he is and he happens to be the best person for me.”

For Cohen, too, there isn’t any doubt that after 20 years of marriage, he would still go down the same road. “We certainly have a complicated and difficult relationship at times,” he said, “and some of that stems from those cultural impasses, but for sure, I would do it again.”