The borders I crossed

I wanted to become a respected scientist, maybe not a Nobel Prize winner but someone who is capable of making a decent contribution. I started by studying biochemistry at the University of Bucharest. I graduated less than a year after the end of Nicolae Ceaușescu’s dictatorship. Free to see the world for the first time, I was eager to get a Ph.D. in the United States. My father, a biology teacher who referred to all trees by their scientific names and often explored the neighboring Măcin Mountains with his students, encouraged me to go.

When I was young, borders were serious, scary things. Crossing the first border required a passport—banned during the dictatorship—a student visa, and a one-way ticket that cost the equivalent of my father’s yearly income. I bought my ticket, Bucharest to New York, using three bricks of devalued Romanian currency provided by the Soros Foundation. I waved goodbye to my family at the airport. The first border was the hardest; for the rest of my life, I just pushed my way across them.

I became a graduate student at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey. For 6 years, I studied relentlessly—signal transduction in yeast—and adapted to a new culture. Crossing the boundary into another discipline, I became a postdoc at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC). It was—an extraordinary place, full of enthusiasm, sharp minds, and state-of-the-art resources focused on understanding and curing cancer. There I met Amore, the postdoc from Rome with pistachio-green eyes. We got married, had a baby, and became permanent residents.

When my research project sank, I moved briefly into medical writing but found that field too remote from my goal. I returned to MSKCC as a research project manager, working in immunology with inspiring clinician-scientists. We rolled out several cancer-research discoveries from the lab into clinical practice.

Amore’s research prospered, and he won a coveted independent-researcher position offered by City of Hope, outside Los Angeles, California. I followed him, of course, and my odyssey continued. I worked at City of Hope and then at the John Wayne Cancer Institute, adding pebble after pebble to the cancer-research pyramid. I prepared clinical-trial protocols, grants, and new-drug applications.

In 2009, Amore had an opportunity in Melbourne, Australia. Holding in one hand a one-way ticket and in the other my 8-year-old daughter’s hand, I crossed another border. I had a work visa but no work prospects. I started from zero in yet another culture.

In Australia, many scientists work part-time, especially women. Jobs in academia are scarce, translational research is in its infancy, and the job market is small compared with the one in the United States. I got my first part-time job by responding to a broad “expression of interest” ad placed by a well-known epidemiologist. He saw the value of my skills and relied on my experience to start a high-risk project. Soon after, I got another part-time job, at biotech company Avipep, and then another, at the Ludwig Institute for Cancer Research. In the 4 years I spent in Australia, I worked all the part-time and consulting jobs I could find, sometimes two or three at a time, following my passion and doing whatever I could to stay fully employed.

I left Australia more than a year ago to return to City of Hope for a job I could not refuse. Most of the projects I started in Melbourne had achieved their goal. My family fell apart, but that’s another story. I left Amore behind and resettled with my daughter in Los Angeles.

Looking back from midcareer, those borders seem much less scary. I took risks, followed passions, changed visas, packed and unpacked, explored, settled, worked hard, met mentors, and fought to build a career. I made a decent contribution to science—with more to come I hope—placing my own small pebbles, one by one, on the pyramid of research.

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