

Letters to My Grandfather who has Never Left His Homeland...

By

Iva Metiva

28th August 2017

Dear Grandfather,

After traveling more than twenty hours, I managed to arrive smoothly in Hong Kong. If you think we had a very warm summer, then you cannot imagine what I felt when I exited the airport! You worried a lot about me travelling alone, but I found some girls on the same flight who were really friendly and we spent the whole flight chatting. My luggage also arrived! After picking up our suitcases and exchanging some money we headed to the stop for the taxis. As my mom had told me after doing some research online, I was supposed to take a green taxi because only the green ones go to the New Territories (the area where my university is located). The exit doors opened and I experienced such a heat wave that for a moment I could not breathe. You cannot imagine how warm and humid it was! And you were complaining about the 30 degrees this summer in Bulgaria! On the way to the university I was able to observe the night scenery in Hong Kong. I had heard that Hong Kong has a huge number of tall buildings and skyscrapers, but what I saw firsthand was unreal. And by tall, I do not mean blocks with more than fifteen floors. Most residential buildings have forty floors, and the commercial ones – up to hundred. My arrival was at night, so one could only see the blinking lights in the tiny apartments of these tall buildings. I started thinking about what kind of people live there, and what their apartments look like. Are they similar to the place where we leave? After almost an hour in the taxi, we arrived safely in front of my dormitory, one of the newest buildings for students. When I entered my room, I was amazed by the view. I am afraid that I need to go to grab some food for dinner. I am curious to find out what kind of food people here eat. Wish me luck! I just wanted to let you know that I arrived safe and sound in Hong Kong.

Love,

Your Granddaughter



View from my dorm room

7th October 2017

Dear Grandfather,

More than a month has passed since I sent you my last letter. So many things have happened since then. First of all, thank you for your birthday card! Receiving something from you in Hong Kong made me feel grateful for the family I have. Say thank you to granny, as well.

I made some progress in learning the local language. Now, I know how to introduce myself in Cantonese. It sounds something like this: 大家好！我是 Iva。我來自保加利,是一個學生。 I know you will not be able to read it out loud, but once I come back, I will teach you how to introduce yourself in Cantonese.

Living in Hong Kong is very different from the life that we have at home. I know that for you, moving from your small village to our city was a step filled with hurdles and difficulties, but you made it! I also know how nostalgic you get once you start recalling the time you spent in your village; how you met my grandmother and proposed to her; and how you forgot to inform the municipality that you had a daughter so my mom's birth date is still messed up. Even though I've already lived in several cities, including a metropolis like New York City, Hong Kong is certainly distinct.

There are more than 7 million people living in Hong Kong. Yes, that is the population of our whole country. But, the area of Hong Kong is hundred times smaller than the size of Bulgaria. Yes, hundred times! So, you can imagine how difficult it is to find an apartment here. If you think that your apartment is small, you should see the size of the apartments here. In fact, housing is one of the major issues in Hong Kong. Getting a decent place to live is quite challenging. Most people end up living in tiny apartments their whole life.

Even though it is a very densely populated city, people manage to go to work on time, to meet friends and have fun despite the crowds. Hong Kong is not just about rushing people and tall buildings. Hong Kong has areas with beautiful nature where you can find obscure places. My friends and I have gone on some hikes, visited the beach and even jumped off a cliff (do not tell

mom, she will start worrying). It was amazing to find such peaceful places within such a hectic city.

Now, let me tell you more about my roommate Winnie. I remember how surprised you and my mom were when you found out that I was going to share a room with a local girl. Due to the fact that I am an only child, I have never experienced sharing a room with someone else. On the one hand, I was excited; on the other, a little bit scared about whether I would be able to get along with my roommate. Fortunately, Winnie is amazing. She studies cell and molecular biology and is in her second year of studies. Surprisingly, she is learning German so I am able to help her with this challenging *sprache*. She worries when she tries to speak in German but I encourage her to be brave and not to give up on learning the language. She is very curious about Bulgaria. Constantly, she poses questions about our homeland and living conditions. She even applied for a trip organized by the university to go to Bulgaria. Unfortunately, she did not get a place but I invited her to come to visit our family. I hope you will have the chance to meet her and get to know another culture through her.

I decided to enroll in a program offered by the university about teaching English in local primary schools. I thought this would be a great chance to immerse myself more in the local culture by getting to know children who have not been exposed so much to an international environment. The kids are amazing! Until now we've only had one meeting with all participating schools. We got to know each other, played games and interacted with each other. I was amazed by how well these kids speak English. I even thought that their English was way better than mine so I was insecure about teaching them English. But, it is not only about me teaching them in English. It is also about them showing me part of their culture. I was introduced to their favorite local food. I had the chance to try the tofu pudding which was really yummy.

I am afraid that I need to stop here because my friends are waiting for me to leave for the airport and catch our flight to Vietnam.

Love,

Your Granddaughter



Playing games with children from local primary schools

16th November 2017 (one month until I return home)

Dear Grandfather,

I would like to use this letter to respond to a question that you keep posing to me, but somehow, I manage to change the subject and not provide you with an answer. ‘Ива, дядо, защо ти трябва пак да ходиш някъде?’ (Iva, why do you need to go anywhere again?) – You ask me every time when I am about to say goodbye and leave for my next adventure. You always have tears in your eyes when asking this question. You say it is because you are concerned about me but I also know that it is partly because this might be the last time we see each other... Trust me, it is not easy to say goodbye to you each time but I hope you can understand me why I am doing it. I think you deserve to know what I feel inside every time before my father calls out: ‘Iva, it is time. The airplane is not going to wait for you.’

You know I grew up with a father who did not stay home but worked in several foreign countries. When I was young, I was awaiting his return with excitement not only because of the presents he would bring to me, but also the stories he would tell me. I grew up with the awareness that the best way to get to know the world is to visit it. Documentaries, books and history lessons are insufficient to bring to you the atmosphere and the way people in different places live. Seeing new places, meeting diverse people and visiting different countries not only means that a new country is crossed off your bucket list, it is also a new way of seeing the world, which can help you to appreciate what you have and had; and can give you more memories. I am sure you have recognized how much I have changed since I have lived in five different countries. Moving to a new country feels like a small part of my comfort zone is coming off. At the

beginning it is hard, but once you get used to, you feel so powerful that you are able to give up all of it.

I still struggle to understand why you refuse to leave the boundaries of Bulgaria. Remember that summer when I was trying to convince you to go at least to the border with Romania, only a two-hour drive from our house? It was so difficult to persuade you, but I respected your refusal. Most probably, you have difficulties comprehending why I cannot stay at home and keep switching between countries. But you also respect my decision. If I say that times have changed, that would not be sufficient to explain the difference between my willingness to constantly travel and your willingness to stay within the borders of your homeland. Sure, traveling nowadays is more convenient. There is, however, something else. Your heart belongs and is going to belong to Bulgaria. My heart belongs and is going to belong to the world. Because I define myself as a global citizen who identifies herself as being part of the emerging world community. I feel the need to get to know the world we are living in and to contribute to its well-being. Because, grandpa, if you do not see the world, you cannot understand it, and if you cannot understand it, you cannot change it. And trust me, this world needs a change!

Love,

Your Granddaughter who will not stop exploring the world . . .

About the author

Iva Miteva was a semester-long international exchange student at CUHK from September to December 2017. Originally from Varna, Bulgaria, she is enrolled in a Master's program in International Relations at the Free University of Berlin in Germany. She has a Bachelor's Degree in Political Science from the University of Mannheim, Germany. As an undergraduate, she took part in an international exchange semester at Trinity college in Hartford Connecticut, USA from Sept- December 2014.