

Transcript for Oral History Review
Conducted for University of Maryland Course IMMR400- Spring 2016
Instructor: Dr. Thomas Castillo

Interviewer's Name: Lauren Wise
Interviewee's Name: Azhena Abraham
Interviewee's Country of Origin: Albania
Interviewee's Current Residence: Lovettsville, Virginia
Date of Interview: April 6, 2016
Place of Interview: Washington, D.C.

LW: My name is Lauren Wise and I am interviewing Azhena Abraham. It is 5:07 on April 6th, 2016 and we are in Washington D.C. Azhena, thank you for being here and taking the time to talk with me today. Do I have your permission to record this interview?

AA (0:16): Yes.

LW (0:17): Ok, great. Um, so let me start off with some basic details. When and where were you born?

AA (0:21): I was born in April—on April 4th, 1980 in Tirana, Albania.

LW (0:27): Ok, and can you describe for me a little bit what your hometown was like?

AA (0:31): So I was born in Tirana, Albania which is the capital, but uh, then we moved to a town called Krujë, it's north of Albania it used to be the old capital during the 1600's and stuff, or during the Ottoman Empire invasion. So, the town was very mountainous from a geographical perspective, you know, it was a—it was probably, I want to say like 12,000 people from a population—um very rocky, um we had the Albanian Alps that we call them, really high mountains, um, they're old mountain formations so you can actually see, um very rocky, uh looks. Um, very close-knit community, but because Albania was under a communist regime, in terms of a religious background perspective—I have to say from a, because of the Ottoman Empire, the history that this town carried it was primarily Muslim, uh and only ten percent were Christians. Again, being under communism religion was not uh considered a factor, right, in the population but in hidden ways people practiced it somewhat, so you could see how religion actually had an effect on the culture as well, like on people's observation of things and how people behaved and so forth so you can definitely see the distinctions still even after so many years that communism was intact.

LW (1:49): Um, did your family practice a religion?

AA (1:51): No. Um, so Albania was considered 100 percent atheist and uh—actually I have to say maybe my grandparents did some of it, but uh, my parent's generation was a lot less influenced by religion due to um, due to that, influence right, due to that the uh, the influence of communism so it was taken away. And my generation even more. Like we are completely uh, not affiliated with anything, at all.

LW (2:18): So were there like, Albanian traditions or cultural practices that you still participated in, or not really because, no religion.

AA (2:26): Absolutely. No, absolutely. There were still practices. I mean, um, so my—so this is the interesting part about Albania, it's probably one of the few countries where people had interfaith marriages. Meaning that, actually, my dad, by a family bloodline, he's a Muslim. But my mom, by family bloodline, is a Greek Orthodox and Russian Orthodox. So here you have a family where you have a blended, interfaith religious so you can tell that religion was really not a factor, right. Normally people marry within the same religious background, but not in Albania. You saw a lot of these interfaith marriages. And, part of it was like I said, communism had an influence on that, right, kind of took away the—the difference in that. So—so the funny part is I lived in a community with 90 percent that practiced more like—not practiced but observed maybe here and there, like the Islamic, uh calendar, but here we are, like I'm—for Easter, we celebrated Easter too, so we, we were sending like red eggs all around our neighborhood, and they accepted everything. And then they would bring us *Ashure* which is a traditional Muslim dish during a certain, uh holiday, like Ramadan actually, they give you *Ashure*. It's like a plate that you share around the neighborhood. Very well understood, right, very connected. And um, (pause) very accepted. There was no discrimination in that sense.

LW (3:45): Interesting. Um, so you mentioned your, your Mom and your Dad, did you have brothers and sisters also?

AA (3:51): Yes, I have one sister who is three years younger than I am.

LW (3:54): Ok. What language or languages did you speak in your home?

AA (3:59): Uh, we spoke Albanian, a little bit of Russian. So my mother's mother, my grandmother is Ukrainian. Uh, and in the 1950's, uh there was an exchange of folks, professional folks from Albania to Ukr—to Russia, and my grandfather, who was an Albanian went to Russia to study in the Soviet Union to study, um, uh actually direct, to become a director of a theater. Uh, those are the times that we had good relationships with the Soviet Union, um and that's where he got married, he got to know this girl and got married and then brought her to Albania. Um, and so that's why I have a little bit of that Russian influence. It's not because Albania was considered part of the Russian Bloc, a lot of people think that it's part of the Russian Bloc. It's really not, it's really the Balkans. And it's a country that had relationships with Russia, right, they were, you know, they were part of that—like Russia helped us in the 50's and the 60's, but after that our leader disconnected the ties with Russia as well and became really self-isolated.

LW (4:59): (Pause) Um, ok did you go to school nearby where you lived?

AA (5:03): Um, yes. Uh, I, uh, I did go to school. So of course elementary school, um, middle school and then high school. And then actually, the middle of high school I came to the U.S.

LW (5:14): Ok, and so what was your school like in Albania?

AA (5:17): Very structured. A lot of focus on sciences, exact sciences. Um, so extremely structured. Um, difficult. Um, it was considered very high end, like from a priority perspective. So, my parents were in the education process. My dad, uh was a principal and after that he worked for the Ministry of Education and my mom also ended up, um working for uh, working for the um, as a head educator in math and physics and my dad was chemistry and biology, so biochemistry. But um, basically the doctors and the teachers were paid the same rate, that's how highly they were regarded. And even when you walk down the street, they called you professor. Like, it's very, it's very highly—education was very highly held. And even today it's—it's a little like that.

LW (6:02): So is that where your sort of interest in education comes from?

AA (6:06): I think so.

LW (6:07): Yeah?

AA (6:08): I think generationally speaking it seems like we all are teachers somehow. (Laughs)

LW (6:11): (Laughs) Um, so besides school what did you do in your spare time?

AA (6:16): Uh, you know of course we don't have the technology that we have today. Uh, our television was so minimal, like our—we could turn on the television only at 6 p.m. There were only movies at 6—not movies, but whatever controlled shows there would be from 6 p.m. to like 10 p.m. That's all the TV you could watch, there was nothing else. Um, and you were only allowed to watch Albanian TV, otherwise you could be in danger of being spied on and considered uh, an enemy of the people because you are watching other stations and so forth. So, anyway, it was much more basic, right, you play outside a lot, you go read quite a bit, um, and the other thing that Albanians did a lot during this time frame because there was limited literature in Albanian language, a lot of us had to learn foreign languages so we can find out more about literature—or anything, right—science, anything, in other languages. So, many Albanians speak three or four languages. They learned Italian, a lot of them speak Italian. They speak, uh, German and French. There's a huge French, uh—actually we call them Francophone population in Albania that actually learned French really, really well. And of course the English language being another popular one.

LW (7:23): So did you learn those languages in school?

AA (7:26): No

LW (7:27): Or did people do this outside of the classroom?

AA (7:28): No. Outside, outside of the classroom was done in a very private way. You had to be careful too, there was a point that you were tracked if you were learning a foreign language. Again, you know, it was such a controlled system, under communism, but my generation there was a little bit more freedom in a way, you know, it wasn't so controlled. My parent's generation, much more controlled. In my generation, which is 1980 on, right, think about my

generation being born in 1980, there was definitely a little bit more flexibility in what languages to learn. So

LW (7:56): Mhm. So did you personally learn any languages outside of—you mentioned Russian and Albanian?

AA (8:02): So, I uh, I personally—so my, my Russian is from my mom, right, because it was her—became her native tongue from her mother. But, uh, I learned Italian, starting third grade, and there's that—a lot of that influence because we are geographically very close to Italy. And talking about the TV—TV was a great influence. We would go up in the antenna and illegally tie the antenna, so you could see what the Italian channels were. And that's how we learned Italian! Through TV. But—but then we went to private courses. Um, and then I learned English in school. Um, in school you could either choose Russian or English as a, as a choice. And somehow, I don't know why they did this, they would say the good students want to learn English, but the poor performing students they would go to learn Russian. Which is odd, because Russian is a very tough language. (Laughs) But, it's just for whatever reason, that's how they divided the classroom, we didn't have a choice necessarily.

LW (8:50): Oh ok, so you learned English...

AA (8:52): Yes, I learned English.

LA (8:53): ...while you were still in Albania?

AA (8:54): Correct. Fifth grade on. Mhm.

LW (8:56): Ok, and um, you went to school in Albania through primary school, through high school and then you decided to participate in this exchange program?

AA (9:05): Exactly. And it's a high school exchange program. So I was sixteen years old when I participated, I was a sophomore.

LW (9:13): (Pause) Ok, and had you ever visited the United States before? Did you know that that's where you were going to go at the time?

AA (9:20): No, actually, um, so, my situation was a little different at that time frame. There was a competition that was going on in Albania through another private—this is 1996 where the borders were open, communism had collapsed, and many associations were interested in the Soros Foundation and some other associations I can't recall now. But, they were very interested in getting the youth to get, uh exposure to the outside world. So, there was some interaction. What they would do, they would pick the best students in the country and we'd compete. Um, and I did have an option to go to Italy was one, and England. Um, but I was actually more interested in America to be honest, and, um, this required—the American option required investment, private investment. And, um, with my parents, I said you know I really think that I'm more interested in America than going to Italy. Um, and so through my parents discussions

and them helping me through this, I made it to the States. And of course getting that visa, that visa at the embassy. That's the biggest thing. You have to pass that. (Laughs)

LW (10:22): Right, yeah that's important. Um, so was your family overall supportive of you coming to the United States?

AA (10:28): Uh, my mom was very scared because I was so young, right. Totally new and totally different part—anticipation of what America is, right, I mean we look at America in a very different view from now when I'm here. Now I'm like “Oh my goodness, how did I do all of this?” But—but, my dad, very supportive. And of course with my dad's support my mom also said “Yup, if you are ready for it, you can definitely do it.”

LW (10:47): So, what was your perception of the United States before you came here?

AA (10:50): Um, I think we (sighs) uh, you know, like we think of America as very perfect, right. And I think maybe a lot of foreigners have that, like we just see this—everything perfect. Um, in terms of influence and like the law enforcement aspect, right. A lot of us want stable government, stable- and there is. There is. But then of course, as you live here, you realize some of the issues that, you know, I had, and some of the, uh dilemmas and things and we know the needs of the population and stuff like that. It's obviously not perfect, right, but that's the—the expectation from the outside, that everything goes to the tee in America. It's perfect. (Laughs)

LW (11:29): Mhm. So um, was your primary reason for doing the exchange program just to get an education, or did you intend to stay beyond your program?

AA (11:43): Very good question. And I consider myself an immigrant of education, because I really—when I left Albania, Albania was in great shape, you know, great condition. Actually, a lot of us I think that left that year wanted to come back to our countries, and really come back and contribute to rebuilding of—of our nations, right. Um, when I came here it was totally for education purposes. Um, and then a year after the war started in Albania and literally the borders did close. I couldn't literally go back. So, then I had to figure out other ways. But—but the first intention was to go back.

LW (12:17): Were you able to still contact your family in Albania?

AA (12:19): Not for a while.

LW (12:20): Not for a while?

AA (12:21): Not for a while.

LW (12:22): Wow.

AA (12:23): And, yeah, that's where my immigration process starts, actually. At that point.

LW (12:25): So when you came here, you—where did you move initially?

AA (12:31): Uh, Dayton, Ohio.

LW (12:32): And did you have say over where you got to go?

AA (12:28): No.

LW (12:35): They placed you?

AA (12:36): Exactly. Mhm. The association placed me.

LW (12:38): Ok. And so, what was your host family like?

AA (12:40): Uh, so both of my, uh, host parents, they—host family, um, they uh, they worked uh—uh they had only a high school education, right. So, they were doing this I think to do a favor to someone else, or something like that—somebody had asked, uh but they were very kind, very kind people. Uh, they took me—I mean I saw part of America that I would have never imagined. You know, here I am, in the Midwest. Um, and seeing their—things through their eyes. And, maybe this will lead to other stories. But, I lived through many families. Some were very well to do financially, and some were less well to do financially. And so I've had this exposure to the different areas of the United States, and what people's perceptions are of things. Uh, and it has been an amazing experience for that.

LW (13:28): Yeah, it sounds like it. Um, did you know anybody else in the United States? Or in Ohio? Or...?

AA (13:36): In Ohio I didn't know anyone else. I did know one more family. Uh, and I knew that family because my dad at the time also, um was running a plant, a dairy plant, um, you know. And uh, there were American experts that came during, before I just left for the United States. So I got to know them a little bit, I was translating quite a bit for my dad at the time. Um, and I knew this family lived—family lived actually in the state of Virginia. So that's the only family I knew at the time.

LW (14:04): Yeah, um so, what were some of the immediate cultural differences that you—you saw when you got here?

AA (14:10): Food. Food was the first thing.

LW (14:11): Food?

AA (14:12) And space. Uh, huge spaces. I didn't expect America to have so much land. I just, I couldn't imagine it, I guess.

LW (14:21): Right, and you were out in the Midwest, so even more so than here.

AA (14:25) More so, and uh, I was expecting everything being tall buildings. So, think of us, you know, the perception that existed, like everything looks like Chicago or New York, right. That's our perception. But then coming in here, there's like this (pause) vast amount areas of—of agriculture. And that's the perception just didn't hit yet, right. Um, the other thing is like how people interact. We are very social in Albania, very—there's this social component, like we, we hang out a lot with each other, we spend a lot of time with each other. You do close quarters, probably, not having so much space available—uh, very communicative. And I found it very difficult in the States initially where I felt like people were more individualistic. Part of it is because there is more space, right, people can go to their own room and do what they need to do and all of that. I found that rude initially. I'm like “Wow. How rude, right?”

LW (15:13): (Laughs)

AA (15:14): But that was part of the culture.

LW (15:15): Right.

AA (15:16): Not seeing people in the streets. Like we walk everywhere, go everywhere. That was also a big shock. I had a really hard time with that. I felt alone. You know?

LW (15:23): Mhm.

AA (15:24): Because I didn't see people.

LW (15:25): Right so that leads kind of into my next question. Did you feel that you fit in to your new environment? Obviously you spoke English, but did you feel at the time, like more Albanian completely, than American?

AA (15:41): Absolutely. Very difficult transition. I had such, you know talking about education, of course I really—I had this really high expectations of myself to do really well in school. And I spoke English very well at the time too. But very well as a secondary language, right, or a tertiary language. So I was not familiar with many terms. And learning American history and English for the first time, I felt overwhelmed. I was in these honor classes, I was enrolled in honor classes, and then I doubled my workload because I was trying to graduate from high school in the U.S. and I came here as a junior. So I ended up taking requirements for junior and senior year, you know, to graduate. And, it was very overwhelming. Uh, the only things I could grab on were math and science because they came very easy, not much language there (Laughs). And, I could relate very easily to those areas. But then, even in those areas, I remember using the Texas Instrument calculator—I was overwhelmed. I'd rather sit and do it by hand than using the calculator. So, I felt like I came from the 50's. You know, and here in America I was in 1996, but I came from like the—I kind of fit better with the old, old generation. (Laughs)

LW (16:46): So, there was kind of a technological lag, you would say, between Albania and where you were living?

AA (16:52): Yes. Yes. And my focus at the time was so—to do so well in school that I think I bypassed all of these cultural influences, you know, like I said “Ah, no big deal, you know, I’ll eat, uh, I’ll eat what they eat” You know, just figure it out at some point, I’ll just do what I need to do. But, making sure that I adjusted to the school system, that was my biggest priority.

LW (17:13): Mhm. Were you able to make friends easily? Or...

AA (17:15): Yes. Very acceptable people. I found them very loving, very acceptable. And, you know it was amazing that there is no rank. You know, nobody played a rank. Like the principal would say “Hello”—I loved that. I mean in Albania it is much more formal when you talk to the principal, and much more formality to that, or with the teachers, a lot more formal. Very respectful structure. Here, it’s like very open and—just loving teachers. And, I have to say that part of my success is because of those loving teachers in the high school, to encourage you that you’re gonna do okay.

LW (17:44): Yeah, so you found that people were accepting of...

AA (17:47): Yes.

LW (17:48): ...immigrants or, you know, there was no sort of prejudice that you encountered?

AA (17:53): No. I never experienced that to be honest. Even, yeah. And we’ll talk more but yeah.

LW (17:57): Yeah. Um, so how did you adapt to, sort of overcoming these challenges?

AA (18:03) Um, I think patience and endurance, right. I think that’s what you hear from probably a lot from the immigrants. You know, to be honest, nobody wants to be an immigrant. I can tell you that. You ask every immigrant—you’ll hear lots of interviews probably in your project. And, no one wants to abandon their country, their customs, their language—because it’s so much harder, right, to come back and like “Oh my gosh,” start all over again. Sure, you can do the exchange of cultures and things, but to really adopt everything. And, take in everything. It’s a lot, right. Um, but you do that through perseverance. You know, you insist. And, the other thing you think about is that, you look at the conditions that you are facing at the time and you look at what this country provides. And that’s why I’m amazed at this, you know, the opportunities this country provides. Actually, that was one of the reasons why I wanted to come to the States, and not go to Italy. I understood Europe a little bit more than I understood America and I was just curious to see about their political system, their economic system. Uh, those were the areas I was so, so curious about, like “How do they make it work?” You know. Um...

LW (19:05): Yeah, I was—I was gonna ask you, I know from just doing the research that a lot of people that left Albania during the same time that you did, did go to Greece or to Italy. But, you were interested in something totally, completely different?

AA (19:18): Completely different. Um, because part of it is, I—you know, I—like I said, I did—a lot of us idealized America. And it’s a lot harder to reach America than to reach Europe, right.

Because even the visas that are given are very, you have to—very limited. And you also have to pass this test, at the embassy. And, I can tell you from my experience, the person before me, that was right in front of me did not get her visa and I did. So it's like, I don't know, if you call it a miracle, I just can't—I can't tell how they pick the criteria. She spoke—I thought she spoke English very well too, I know that language is a criteria that you have to meet.

LW (19:56): Right.

AA (19:57): But I don't know how the decision is determined of who gets the visa and who doesn't. So, it is a lot tougher to come in this country than to go to Europe.

LW (20:04): Right so—so would you say the immigration process at that point was pretty easy for you then?

AA (20:10): No. I'd say it's very difficult. I think—like I said, I came in as an exchange student, so it's an exchange student visa. Right, it's a J-1 visa, uh and then after that point you're supposed to go back, right. That's a...

LW (20:22): And you said you completed your high school requirements in one year?

AA (20:29): Yes. So I came as a sophomore and uh, due to my situation at the time because there was a war that started in Albania, due to the Pyramid Schemes in '97, I could not go back. I could contact my family, so I knew that, I either—I had to stay here, somehow. Um, I didn't know where Albania was going to go, you know, there is a civil war going on. So, what I ended up doing is, I needed to graduate. And then the second semester I asked if my school could help me graduate. And they had never done that before, so I was the first exchange student in that school that graduated.

LW (21:04): Oh, wow. That's...

AA (21:05): They had never done that for anyone else. I was the first Albanian, but also the first exchange student in that school so they had to learn the whole process. Um, and what I needed to do. And, one thing I had to do was, I had to take the proficiency exams. The freshman proficiency exams and the senior proficiency exams. (Laughs) So...

LW (21:18): (Laughs) Oh my gosh.

AA (21:20): Right there, you get introduced to the American system, I'm like "It doesn't make sense, does it?" because if you're going to pass the senior ones, why do I have to take the freshman ones? (Laughs)

LW (21:26): Right, yeah that's strange.

AA (21:29): But that's part of the criteria. Right, the rules. And uh, that's what happened.

LW (21:32): Did you continue living with your host family during that whole time?

AA (21:38): Yup. It was a one year exchange and I lived with the same family during that one year.

LW (21:40): And then what did you do after you graduated from high school?

AA (21:44): After I graduated from high school, then I moved to the people that I knew in Virginia, because they're family friends and they accepted—they said that they could help me out. And, at that time, we were going to use that timeframe to figure out a college that would provide some sort of a full ride scholarship. And from an international student perspective, that's very hard to come across. It's not just your academics, you—I mean many times you have to show some kind of financial backing because by law you had to show that I cannot become a burden to the government, right?

LW (22:11): Right.

AA (22:12): So, it was very hard to find full ride scholarships that covered your room and board and your tuition. And, what I ended up doing is I came here, um to Virginia. We—I did only a half a semester at the community college, Rappahannock Community College in Glenss, Virginia. Only one semester. And I used all that time to search for all these colleges all around the United States to see what could offer the best scholarship. And that's what I did. Um, and we—I found one, we found one through my—through this family that helped me out, called Blackburn College in Carlinville, Illinois.

LW (22:45): Ok so you moved back to the Midwest then, again?

AA (22:48): (Laughs) Yes. And they pretty much provided a full ride. So

LW (22:53): And what was that school like, I've never heard of it. Was it a small college?

AA (22:57): It's a private college, uh 600 students. And because they were a private college they didn't depend on government grants to provide to me, because international students could not get government related grants they had to get private grants. And because, that's why, I had to only look at private universities. I could not look at state or government run universities. Um, so that's the reason why I went to private school. But they provided, through a private scholarship they were able to provide pretty much a full ride. And um they, and many other opportunities, you know. At the same time, I was qualified for a Soros foundation scholarship. A Soros also paid for my first year or two, or compensated what was left. But yeah, school was small, six hundred student total. A good range of majors, I majored in International Business and Economics. And I did a minor in Spanish.

LW (23:42): Oh ok, so was that be your fourth language that you knew?

AA (23:47) Yeah. I actually did that because I thought “Oh, you know, I'm forgetting Italian, maybe I take Spanish” and that was the reason—but yeah, that would be the, the fourth.

LW (23:55): Mhm. Um, and did you work while you went to college?

AA (24:00): Yes. Actually this college is, is a requirement. You have to work. That's part of the requirement of the college and it's amazing because this—they on purpose start you at the bottom. So you have to like, all the freshmen when they come in, they start either campus services, meaning you clean the basements or you clean the offices or whatever, or food service. And then you move up the rank. And their ideology is as such where um, in life you're going to start at the bottom but through your hard work you'll actually get to this point. And there are about six of these work colleges in the United States that practice this principle. And it's very interesting, it's uh, I mean, I made it to manager, right, in college. So some of those skill sets, you learn them as a sophomore or as a junior, right.

LW (24:40): Mhm. So essentially you work for the college and they will provide your tuition and your room and board? Is that how it works?

AA (24:45): Not the whole thing, a portion of it.

LW (24:49): A portion of it.

AA (24:50): And some of it is scholarships, right, academic scholarship. So from—in my case, some of it was academic scholarship and some of it was through working on campus.

LW (24:55): Oh ok.

AA (24:57): Correct.

LW (24:58): And uh, you mentioned before the interview that you met your husband at Blackburn College, how exactly did you meet him?

AA (25:03) He was a biology major, and I guess, uh, we were freshmen I think at the time. I think I was sophomore—uh maybe a sophomore, yeah. And we met in the dining hall. And through conversation our relationship grew and, very much like friends initially. So

LW (25:16): And, when were you married?

AA (25:17): Uh, we were married in 2000, in Springfield, Illinois.

LW (25:20): Was this before you graduated?

AA (25:24) So, that's another jump I did in college. I graduated in three years, in my undergrad. And uh, part of that is because I felt like there was a—I felt like I needed to make sure that financially I was okay, you know, so that's how I did it. I graduated in three years for that reason.

LW (25:39): Right so, and so your husband, is he from the area originally, is he a U.S. citizen?

AA (25:45) Yes, he's from Madison, Wisconsin originally, but uh, they had lived in uh, Springfield, Illinois area for a long time, at the time.

LW (25:53): And, so when you married him, you became a permanent resident? Is that correct?

AA (25:58): Yes, so uh, after I married him, actually, you have to go through this process where you file uh, to become a permanent resident based on marriage. And, that was—there is a two year waiting period to remove those conditions of marriage. Because it's proof to USCIS to show that it's not fraudulent, it's like a real marriage.

LW (26:16): Mhm.

AA (26:18) So, you go through all this process, but honestly from an immigration process, mine took a long time. Uh, the—actually, the approval process to get approved for my permanent residency took about four to five years, I think.

LW (26:30): Oh wow.

AA (26:31): It should have happened in I think two years, but it took four to five years. Everything, I had to be fingerprinted four or five times, because fingerprints expired every six months, because the cases were so backlogged.

LW (26:40): Yeah, so did they give you a reason for why it took so long? Or just...

AA (26:43): Just backlogged.

LW (26:44): Didn't have to do anything with, you know, where you were from or what you were applying for?

AA (26:49): No, it's just part of where you were, right, in the cue. And I fell under the Chicago district and it seemed like the Chicago district was much more overwhelmed than other districts.

LW (26:57): Right, so at what point did you decide then to naturalize, and become a U.S. citizen?

AA (27:02): Immediately. Because I had uh, I felt like I had struggled so much with this paperwork I said "I don't want to do this again" for one reason. The other reason was, um, I believe that when you adopt a country like I did, the U.S. at the time, I think there's not such a thing as, honestly as having dual citizenship. I know people talk about this all the time but there is not such a thing, right. I think you have that loyalty and that commitment to one country and I knew that if I'm going to continue to live in this country, I will give up my Albanian citizenship for the American citizenship. And, the other thing is, I felt very secured with an American passport versus an Albanian passport. So, when I travel the world, I'd prefer to show an American passport, sure. Um, and, that was my also my —also part of my personal belief system that I think that uh, you know, my grandmother came from Russia to Albania. She gave up her Russian citizenship to be converted to an Albanian citizen, and I felt the same way. I felt that I needed to adopt fully, this country.

LW (28:00): And so at that point you started to feel more Americanized?

AA (28:05) I felt—honestly I think that even in Albania I was a little bit more Americanized. I felt like, certain principles of this country, like uh, this individualism, where you, you know the freedom of choice and this market economy. I believed in that before I came to the States. So, from that ideology perspective, I fit better (Laughs) And, that's why I didn't go to Europe, honestly, because Europe tends to be a little bit different. Much more controlled.

LW (28:30): Right.

AA (28:31): And that's why I came here—to kind of learn this other side of the story.

LW (28:37): Mhm.

AA (23:38): But yeah, you are right. By the time you live here for so many years, living with so many families from the Midwest to the East Coast a little bit, seeing colleges, seeing my husband's family, and other families that I got to know throughout my years here. I definitely felt more Americanized. For sure.

LW (28:54): And so then after you were naturalized, then you went on to get your Master's degree. Is that correct?

AA (29:03): No. My naturalization happened after I graduated (Fades out). I can't recall if it was the same time. It took a while to get naturalized because at the time, uh there was a huge uh—FBI name checks were taking a long time. And, that's what delayed the case. But I believe—No, yeah, you're right. I graduated—actually, my Master's degree I did in one year or two. So I graduated...

LW (29:21): One year, wow.

AA (29:22) Yeah. I was a permanent resident when I graduated from my Master's degree. So I graduated from my Master's degree in 2001. I became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 2008. So 7 years after.

LW (29:33): Wow. That's a long time. (Laughs) So where did you go to get your Master's degree?

AA (29:37): University of Illinois.

LW (29:39): Ok. And was there anything that influenced you to go there? Did you have a scholarship again? (Laughs)

AA (29:43): Yup. A full ride scholarship. Uh, and the other thing that I really liked about that, you know, that opportunity is that you worked actually for the government. You were given an internship opportunity—kind of like yours Lauren, here, you know, where you work for the

government for a little bit while you get your education. And uh, that's what they did. They provide—they cover all your school expenses and you work twenty hours a week for the government and it's a foot in the door because you get exposure to a job, right. I mean it becomes—it may become a potential job opportunity. And that's what happened to me, it became a job opportunity, after.

LW (30:14): So what part of the government were you working for?

AA (30:16): I worked for the state. For the Illinois State Police.

LW (30:18): Oh ok.

AA (30:20): It was—I found it very exciting. And I—I dedicated quite a bit of my career to the State Police.

LW (30:25): Mhm so was that your first, like official career...?

AA (30:30): Yes. Yes.

LW (30:32): Um, so and you worked there while you went to school?

AA (30:35): Yup. And I worked there afterwards as well.

LW (30:38): Oh ok. So were you pretty optimistic about being able to get a job after you graduated because you already had one lined up?

AA (30:45): Actually, I was approached by them. And uh, it was—yes, very optimistic.

LW (30:48): So how long did you work with them for?

AA (30:50): I—so I worked probably a total of eight years, uh for them, uh through that point, in different areas of State Police.

LW (30:56): Mhm.

AA (30:58): And I still have relationships with those folks there. I mean we still keep in touch quite a bit.

LW (31:01): And this was back in Illinois?

AA (31:03): Yes, back in Illinois.

LW (31:04): Mhm. And then after that, is that when you started to work for USCIS? Or did you have sort of another job in between?

AA (31:12): There was—so this is what happened. Uh, I worked for Illinois State Police for so many years, I think for five years first, then I jumped to Illinois Department of Public Health. And honestly, the reason why I got the job is because there was a Spanish option. Um, the government too, in the state of Illinois goes through a process as well, kind of like our—you know, U.S. government too from a hiring process, it's actually quite tough to get in. Um, you have to go through this testing and there is a quota and there is a list, and it's very tough, actually. There are only—certain criteria you have to meet, right because of the Spanish speaking option, there were not that many applicants I guess, so it was a lot easier to get in, right...

LW (31:49): Right.

AA (31:50): ...to get into the process. So I did that, and from that point I did that for about a year and a half. Um—uh and I moved to a uh, back to State Police, uh, under a different program.

LW (32:00): Ok so your Spanish minor really came in handy there, didn't it?

AA: (32:02): Yes. I never thought about it. It just came—yeah it came in handy for that public health job.

LW (32:07): Yeah so, um what brought you then to this area?

AA (32:43): Um, actually, I was pretty—I felt I was set with the Illinois State Police career. I loved what I was doing. I had a wonderful staff. Wonderful—I felt a wonderful career but my husband's job changed. And this is 2010 where the economy wasn't doing so well. Uh, so he was in—on a contract. And uh at the time in Illinois there were not that many options available. He looked in this area, moved to Winchester, Virginia first, found a job with FEMA. And then after that I followed. So, that's why I'm in this area. I actually started looking for jobs.

LW (32:41): So, your husband works for the government as well?

AA (32:44): Correct. For FEMA.

LW (32:46): And so, where exactly in Virginia are you living now?

AA (32:50): Uh, we live in a town called Lovettsville, Virginia. And it's part of Loudon County.

LW (32:56): And why did you choose to move to that part of Virginia?

AA (32:59) A couple of reasons. Number one, we have now three children, uh two boys—two boys and one girl. And uh, the first thing I checked is the area for educational reasons to see where is the best—again, my education thing continues on—um, to see where is an educational resource that we can use for our children, and we found that that part of Virginia would work for us. And so also, location from a work distance perspective I wanted to have access to public transportation to DC. And, I take the MARC train. Um, and then uh—so I cross the bridge. I go to Maryland side to take the MARC train and Dan goes to Winchester, Virginia. So it's like

halfway almost, kind of—not halfway but I basically have the flexibility of taking public transportation. And for him it's only like forty-five to fifty minutes away to go to Winchester.

LW (33:52): Ok. So would you consider it kind of a more rural part of Virginia?

AA (33:55): Very rural. I'd say it's one of the most rural part of Loudoun County. It's—we're on the West end tip of Loudoun County. Loudoun County is huge, I never realized. It's actually from a surface area, it's like largest county in the U.S, apparently from a surface area—one of the largest counties.

LW (34:11): I didn't know that.

AA (34:13): I learned that recently. And, apparently we live at the tip, like further away tip, uh on the West side of the county.

LW (34:20): Mhm. So I know you mentioned early in the interview that where you grew up in Albania was pretty rural and mountainous. Is it kind of the same feeling?

AA (34:28): Um, some—uh, so Albania—you know, Europe tends to be more populated, right, so, you get a little bit of the mountainous and there is more buildings, right, because there is not enough space. Here, where we are today there's definitely a lot more space.

LW (34:46): Right, yeah definitely. Um...

AA (34:48): More spread out.

LW (34:51): And, you said you have three children. How old are they?

AA (34:53): I have an eight year old, a seven year—a six year old, and a four months old.

LW (34:57): And its two boys and then a girl, correct?

AA (34:59): Yes.

LW (35:00): Um, so, are your children going to school nearby where you live?

AA (35:08): Yes. So, it's literally maybe a mile and a half from where we live.

LW (35:13): Oh, that's nice. And um, when did you start working for USCIS? I can't remember if you already said that.

AA (35:17): Uh, July 2011.

LW (35:21): So you've been here about five years?

AA (35:24): Yes, absolutely.

LW (35:27): Almost exactly.

AA (35:28): Yeah, almost exactly.

LW (35:30): So why were you interested in working for USCIS? Did it happen sort of randomly, or was it something that you planned out?

AA (35:38): Honestly I didn't plan it out. But what I was doing at the time—so I dealt a lot with project management at the Illinois State Police, I was looking for similar careers. But, also I used to work in the intelligence field of State Police, so I had a lot of this criminal justice experience too. So initially I started applying a lot with FBI. Um, but what I realized is that the FBI application process and uh, the list of criteria was a little different, I mean there is a military preference and usually those points are passing. What I realized is so many people from the military were applying with that so it seemed a lot more difficult to make it to that rank, right, because they get the extra points. And then all of a sudden, I was like “Wow, why am I just looking at the FBI?” I should just open my options. And honestly, I applied with OMB, I applied with DA, with the FBI and then all of a sudden USCIS.

LW (36:24): Mhm.

AA (36:25): So I applied everywhere.

LW (36:26): So you weren't interested at the time in working in law enforcement, for like Virginia or anything like that?

AA (36:35): I—No, I needed to go to the federal government I felt because the options would be higher and then I was living in a different area for Virginia and that meant for me to look in the Richmond area, and that's where the capital is and so that's where the state government jobs would have been at the time. Not as much—or maybe a local county sheriff's office, but I really felt that there were more opportunities in the federal government due to the location where we were living.

LW (36:55): Mhm.

AA (36:56): Um, but uh, yeah that's how it started and then I did get an offer from—I can't remember if it was the DA or the uh, OMB, uh Office of Management and uh, Budget. But, somehow this came through. I can't remember exactly what happened, it's just, then I became very interested in this job and the offer was better offer. And, so I ended up with this.

LW (37:18): Hm, very interesting. So, did your immigrant experience kind of influence you to do this type of work? Or not so much?

AA (37:30): Yeah, I think, you know, so, it's funny. I've had such a—uh, interesting relationship with USCIS from a personal experience and kind of struggling through it, right. I mean I did everything on my own, I didn't have an attorney. Um, I felt—actually believe it or not my

Master's thesis was about the immigration process. My—my Master's degree is in Public Administration, so I talked about the organization and I talked about how it went from INS to USCIS. It used to be INS. I did this whole history and I, just to understand where the gaps were, there were some issues with, you know, immigration and where we are and all of that. So I think there was definitely an interest, you know. I really do believe that. But when you're looking for a job, honestly you are looking for opportunities too, right. The best opportunities.

LW (38:14): Right. Yeah.

AA (38:15): So, I kind of went with what I knew. But I do believe that part of my hiring here had a—my experience had an influence probably in that decision. The knowledge base of how the immigration works, I think.

LW (38:30): Right, yeah because we work with a lot of other people that are in similar situations that immigrated here and are personally familiar with it.

AA (38:37): That's right.

LW (38:40): Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. Um, so do you still (clears throat) have family that's living in Albania? Or did eventually they come over here?

AA (38:48): So close family—my, so the funny part is this becomes a chain event—chain of events, right. Uh, I petitioned for my parents, uh because then after I became a U.S. citizen my parents also became permanent residents, I could petition for them. And then uh, so my parents are today U.S. citizens as well.

LW (39:03): Oh wow.

AA (39:05): Yeah, they went through the courses and everything else and they became—they became U.S. citizens either last year or the year before.

LW (39:10): Ok, so how long after you came here did they come over here?

AA (39:16): They came here, uh 19—so I came here in '96, they came here in 2008 from a, uh from a immigration perspective. They were eligible for residency in 2008.

LW (39:28): So did they come live with you?

AA (39:30): Yes. In Illinois.

LW (39:31): Ok. And are they still living there?

AA (39:35): No, uh they moved out here. My sister also lives in D.C. area.

LW (39:38): Oh ok.

AA (39:39): She came here as a student, like I did. (Knock on door) Uh, and uh what happened is uh...

[Interruption] “Hi” “Bye”

AA (39: 53): And um...

[Interruption] “I’m leaving” “Bye” (Laughs)

AA (39:59): Sorry. So that’s where uh—that’s where my parents uh, so in 2008. Right, my sister is here so my parents like this area so much. So that they actually moved with her because they like the ease of public transportation. They, they kind of—it kind of mirrored what Albania looked like a little bit from an ease of reach, right, being able to go out and walk and reach the places a little easier while the Midwest in Illinois it’s a lot more spread out, right. You have to have a car, you need to know how to drive, do all of these things differently. So that’s why they moved out here.

LW (40:33): So would you say their experience is different than yours?

AA (40:37): Yes.

LW (40:37): Maybe more difficult because they were older when they came here?

AA (40:41): Yeah, very different. I don’t think more difficult, from a language perspective, more difficult for them. They were not familiar with English at all, right.

LW (40:49): Oh, they didn’t speak any English?

AA (40:50): No English. A lot of it—it was learned here. Right, they enrolled in some courses and things like that, so much more difficult. And you’re right, culturally speaking its tougher, right, for them. Uh, I remember we—my husband actually taught my dad the rules of the road and how to drive and they could barely communicate with each other so I had to be in the back of the car all of the time translating “No, don’t do that. No don’t turn there.” So a lot of transitions, right. My parents were about 52 years old when they moved here. And, it’s tough. It is really tough. But uh, they’ve come to adjust really well, too. And adopt these changes well. So

LW (41:26): Do you think they feel Americanized? Or would you say that they probably identify more as Albanian because they lived there for so long?

AA (41:33): I think, you know, to be honest, I think my dad because of that ideology, right, I think my dad is so much more American. It’s funny because I feel like my dad has lived here—although his English is so broken and I can barely understand him. He’s, he’s very um, like he’s very in tune with the American politics I mean, it’s just amazing, you know—or like the American processes and stuff like that. And my mom, I think maybe identifies more with the Albanian culture still. I don’t think—I don’t know if the transition has happened yet, but—but yeah, overall I’d say both of them, they understand more.

LW (42:04): Hm, and they're speaking English fluently now, or to some extent?

AA (42:08): Not necessarily. Yeah, you know, they are able to communicate, uh to buy their own groceries, right, to—to go to the offices they need to go to, to communicate to the doctor. But not fluent to the level that we speak here in this conversation.

LW (42:21): Right. So were they able to get jobs when they came here? Or

AA (42:26): No, they're actually in the retirement stage.

LW (42:29): Oh ok.

AA (42:30): Uh, so they are both retired now.

LW (42:31): Hm. Interesting. Um, so have you or do you plan to return to Albania at some point? Or

AA (42:39): To live?

LW (42:40): Or to visit? Or...

AA (42:42): Yeah, actually. That's in the plans. Um, I just somehow throughout the years haven't been able to do it yet. Uh, but uh—I do plan to go back. And part of it is, you know, you want to always share part of your heritage and your background, you know, to your children and to my husband as well, he hasn't been there yet. We visited Japan first, but we didn't go to Albania. (Laughs)

LW (43:00): (Laughs)

AA (43:01): So, it just really—it's part of the works—plan. It's just—when? I don't know yet. Maybe in a couple of years.

LW (43:05): Right. So at any point during this whole process did you ever think about moving back to Albania? Or back to Europe?

AA (43:13): Oh my gosh. You know, when you, when you uh—it's such a process that requires this endurance. Right, this perseverance. That there are times you just want to give up, right, because you are constantly tracking paper and after paper. And then you endure because you can't work, or you are not allowed to do so many things when you are going through the immigration process. You, you are not free—you can't move freely because you are waiting on that piece of paper, right. At any moment—it's not like you have a piece of document you can say "Oh, I can go anywhere" No.

LW (43:42): Mhm. Right.

AA (43:43): Um, so there are many limitations that come with that when you are going through that process and you are kind of—you feel stuck. And limited, right. So yes, there were points where I was like “Maybe I just need to give up” And just go back, you know. But somehow you just push through. You keep pushing through and you make it and you’re like “Oh, I made it, wow, ok, maybe I don’t have to give up yet, right?” (Laughs)

LW (44:02): Right. And so you thought opportunity here would be much greater than back at home?

AA (44:05): (Pause) Yes. For sure. Especially at the way the—the cycle of events that happened in Albania afterwards. In ’96 I didn’t feel that way. After ’96 I did. Things changed dramatically uh, for Albania. And, I would say part of that world, you know. Part of the communist—all the ex-communist countries—things changed quite a bit for them. The stability and what it meant.

LW (44:30): Would you say that women maybe in particular had a more difficult time uh, there?

AA (44:37): No it’s all equal. I’d say.

LW (44:39): It’s all equal?

AA (44:40): You know, one cool thing—I mean one cool thing—one thing different actually talking about differences in cultures too between Albania and the U.S. is that—I feel like there is so more separation here of gender. Like women—you hear a lot about wages and women and men rights. And, just recently—Oh gosh, you can help me in English with this word—what is when you like, distinguish, like, when you become androgyn—uh, what is that called? Where people say “Oh, it’s all—they don’t hire women because they don’t like women?” What’s the word? Misogyn...(Sounds out word) What is that?

LW (45:13): Misogynist?

AA (45:14): Misogynist. Yeah, thank you. I couldn’t think of the word. See...

LW (45:15): (Laughs)

AA (45:17): See, honestly, I’ve heard that word for the first time here. In Albanian vocabulary that word does not exist, actually. So there’s no way for me to even to translate that concept. In communism, women and men are so equal. So equal that there is no separation of gender.

LW (45:34): That’s interesting.

AA (45:36): Your pay, everything, is just the same. You’re treated the same way, regardless. Um, so, to answer your question. Honestly, it was tough for men or women, it didn’t matter. (Laughs)

LW (45:46): Um, so do you still hold on to or practice any Albanian traditions?

AA (45:57): Uh, let me think. Somewhat. You know. I feel like like uh, yeah maybe the New Years, right. We had the New Years and things like that. But now I'm so much part of this calendar, the—I call it the American calendar, that actually I forget when Mother's Day was in Albania, because it's Mother's Day in America and I celebrate the Mother's Day in America—the American Mother's Day.

LW (46:19): So the holidays were pretty similar?

AA (46:19): Not all of them.

LW (46:21): Not all of them?

AA (46:22): Like, there's an Albanian Independence Day. I don't celebrate it anymore. I mean honestly, I really go by the American calendar in everything, right. Mother's Day in Albania it's March 8th but here it is always in May, right. Mhm. Like 7th, May 11th or whatever it is. But, so I go by the American calendar. I do, I even forget about March 8th until I see something on Facebook where people remind me of. Um, there is a Teacher's Day in Albania that's a big thing where you appreciate your teachers and its March 7th. Um, and that's like, I forget about that. It used to be such a big deal, right.

LW (46:52): Mhm. Right.

AA (46:53): So, none of those, I don't think—I've abandoned them.

LW (47:01): Mhm. And you said that you, um, didn't practice an official religion in Albania...

AA (47:05): Correct.

LW (47:07): But do you now?

AA (47:08): Yeah. Um, so, and I still have my skepticism around that right, because I grew up in an atheist country and this is very tough. Coming here and seeing how religion is uh, you know, weaved into the American culture and how it even becomes—the Bible becomes part of the swearing in—it's just interesting. Or you see "In God we trust" in the money, you know, and it's funny, because I'm thinking no strict separation of church and state. And then you see all of these things, but um. It's funny my husband is very religious. And when I mean religious like a very strong association with Christianity. He's a strong practitioner of Christianity and strong relationship with the Church, volunteers at the Church. So it's interesting, me coming from an atheist country, right, I mean, being there, so I got to know more of that. But I do practice Christianity as well. You know I still have my struggles, right. I still have my own doubts and things like that.

LW (47:59): But your husband wanted your children to be raised in a Christian home?

AA (48:03): Yes. And I have embraced that as well.

LW (48:05): Mhm.

AA (48:06): That's correct.

LW (48:06): Is it important to you that your children understand your Albanian—or their Albanian heritage?

AA (48:11): Yes.

LW (48:13): Yes. So do you, you know, try to teach them like words in Albanian, or do they speak the language at all?

AA (48:20): No, I haven't been able to do that. Part of it is because I'm such a working—I work so much, right. And I'm not home that much. And the boys and girl are all in daycare system or school system. And when we come home it's so much easier for me, uh to just switch to English that, it just seems such an extra effort, almost like I need to be there. Plus, I'm not near an Albanian community where we could all practice, they can hear me practice, right.

LW (48:46): Mhm.

AA (48:47): It's only when I'm in relationship with my parents that they hear me. I think if we had exposure to an Albanian community nearby we may be able to practice more Albanian.

LW (48:54): So you haven't been able to meet any other Albanian-Americans, you know, in your community? Or

AA (49:00): Some, some. But you know, in Albania we have this uh, this rule where it is like "Don't meet other Albanians if you are in America" Leave them alone—you need to be on your own. Figure out the Americans first, you know. You got Albanians in Albania. So there's this thing where uh, you don't want to be necessarily part of the Albanian culture because you already had that, you are trying to learn what America is about.

LW (49:21): Right.

AA (49:22): So I didn't necessarily try to seek Albanians either.

LW (49:28): Mhm. Um, ok so I guess I have one final question that's to sort of conclude the interview. Um, if you had never left Albania, how do you think your life would be different than it is today?

AA (49:51): Wow, that's a really—gosh, that's a tough question. Uh, you know why that's a tough question because I have friends in Albania still, that I follow through Facebook or they follow me through Facebook, and I see where they are and I see where I am, right. We were probably very similar in our abilities and skills and family, whatever. Like family backgrounds, right, very homogenous-like type of families. Um (Coughs) I think, if I were to be in Albania I think I would be facing so many other issues than what I face today. Some—maybe some similarities but very, uh different issues. Here, I don't feel like I have to face the issue of

existentialism. You know, meaning that, the existence, the ability to exist. Because I believe that, I have the opportunities. I'm very happy with where I am, I'm very content. Um, I actually think that based on my expectations, I've reached beyond on what I had imagined.

LW (50:33): That's great.

AA (50:39): It's totally beyond what I imagined. I mean—and many times I'm thinking, where I sit today, shouldn't be me, should be an American that was born here, you know, why am I here? Right. (Laughs) Like why—they should get that job, not me, right. Um, so it's beyond my expectations. Totally beyond my expectations.

LW (50:55): So you made the right choice, you think?

AA (50:56): Oh my goodness. I say, it's a good thing that I persevered, it's a good thing that I insisted, um because, it's—the payoff is so much greater. So much greater. And I'm so glad I'm not in Europe. (Laughter) Really, and I love Europe. You know, I love their culture and I love some of the things that they do differently from the U.S., but as a big picture thing, this is definitely the right decision for me, and I love this country for that.

LW (51:21): And this is where you'll stay?

AA (51:22): Yes.

LW (51:23): Alright. Well thank you so much for your time and your willingness to participate in this.

AA (51:28): Absolutely.

LW (51:29): Ok well this concludes the interview and I'll go ahead and turn off the recording.

(51:42): End of recording.