

**Asta Kuodiene**

Asta: "There are no limits to psychiatry. This profession always goes on."
It is a profession that has no end."

Forensic nurse
Training year 2002

Irene Arnold / Asta Kuodiene

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Asta Kuodiene (b. 1975, Lithuania), a nurse, belongs to the first group of Eduployment language students of 2002. After completing the Dutch language course, for the first three years she worked as a nurse in elderly care, psychogeriatric department at the care group AMSTA, its location of "De Poort" in Amsterdam. Then, in mid-2005, she made the switch to forensic psychiatry at Inforsa, also in Amsterdam, where she works on Mondays and Thursdays as a nurse at the centre for Electroconvulsive therapy. On Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays, she is a nurse in the Medical Department, with ultimate responsibility for somatics in the Intensive Treatment Clinic. This job is her dream and goal. Qualities such as optimism, level-headedness and perseverance are the qualities she has brought to her work.

Born in Lithuania, at that time still part of the Soviet Union, she did not have an easy life as the 'new post-Soviet' generation. Asta studied nursing at Kaunas Medical College (an institution of non-university higher education) along with working as a full time psychiatric nurse in Lithuania. When she heard from her professor about Eduployment offering opportunities to work in the Netherlands, she immediately decided to apply. Lithuania was not yet a member of the European Union. Diploma recognition and residence permit had to be procured. 'From general assistance, as well as work and residence permit, to a house with all the trimmings and the intensive supervision and after-care - everything was arranged for me by Eduployment. Eduployment has never disappointed me.'

And on the personal level Eduployment helped Asta through the initial period with her own self-sufficiency: not only did she have to start all over again, but she also had to leave her son behind at first. When she settled, however, and bought her own house and turned it into a home, he came to live with her in the Netherlands. Perseverance and positivity, and the understanding that easy choices aren't always for the better, helped Asta get through. She lives with her partner and his son in a semi-detached house with 6 bedrooms, a "mini-villa", in Voorhout. Her son, now 26, lives independently in Amsterdam, where he works and studies. With 18 Dutch years under her belt, Asta has a remarkable story to tell.



My considerations back in 2002 were very simple: financial. I studied five days a week in Kaunas and worked 36 hours a week as a nurse in the local psychiatric hospital. I had a son, a difficult relationship with my then husband, and parents to look after. The six of us lived in a three-room flat and I saw no possibility of living independently with my nuclear family, renting or buying a house in Lithuania at that time. When I heard during a meeting at my faculty that I could earn €1,800.00 per month with my level of education in the Netherlands, while my salary in Lithuania was far below that, the choice was easy to make.

The switch

After the language training with Eduployment, I could immediately start working at Amsta as an elderly care nurse. Eduployment had arranged that with my Lithuanian diplomas I only had to obtain a few additional partial qualifications. After 3 years at Amsta I applied for a position at the forensic-psychiatric clinic Inforsa. The transition from Amsta's "De Poort" to Inforsa went very smoothly. I was hired within a week. With my papers from Lithuania, the certificate from Eduployment, the Dutch nursing diploma and my work experience in psychiatric clinical care, I could work as both an A and B nurse, which means in a hospital and in psychiatry - exactly what they needed at Inforsa. And so I could start work immediately and without any further training.

Forensic psychiatry: I saw the word 'psychiatry' and it gripped me; only later did I find what the 'forensic' part meant

The thing I didn't know was the meaning of 'forensic' in 'forensic psychiatry' in the Netherlands. I soon found it out, after spending two weeks in the department. People who have committed crimes because of their mental illness are admitted to the forensic-psychiatric clinic. These are the people with schizophrenia or psychosis who have murdered someone, crashed a car, started a fire, broken into a house or attacked someone. They are sentenced by a judge to compulsory treatment on the basis of psychosis or schizophrenia. If the crime is not so violent, for example the destruction of a car, they receive compulsory treatment for one year. But there are also murderers and child rapists who are given a compulsory treatment status, something you often hear about on the news and that could be lifetime. And Inforsa is the clinic where these people are treated. So that's where I ended up. Suddenly.



When nothing else helps, people come to us for electroshock treatment (ECT). We get "the dirt out and keep the good brain cells", as I always say. As a recovery nurse at the ECT centre, I provide after-care for the people with schizophrenia and people with depression post-treatment. These people have been treated for years with various medications, and if they don't work, Electroconvulsive therapy can be administered as a last resort.

After the first intake and determining the treatment plan, they are put under anaesthesia after which electric shocks are administered to the brain cells. The aim is to kill the faulty cells in the brain and ensure that the good ones continue to develop. One time is often not enough. People with depression usually receive 12 treatments and with schizophrenia it's 24 treatments including measurements and fixed evaluation points. I have patients who have been coming

in for ECT treatment two or three times a week for three or four years. Their mental condition does not improve completely, they always remain psychotic. But most of them don't show any aggression any more. So life for them and for their environment is better and safer.

The world of today did not exist then

I find this so incredibly fascinating. The world opened up for me which also opened my eyes -that such a thing also exists! That there is a treatment for these people! In Lithuania, there was no such thing. When I try to explain to people in Lithuania where I work, I use different words. I work in a psychiatric prison, I say. Because in Lithuania you had either a prison or a psychiatric hospital, but not a combination of the two.

There are no limits in psychiatry. The care continues

This work is intensive, but you really build up a bond with the patients during that time. I started out as a general nurse, but in my senior positions later I always accompanied only two or three patients. You start from zero with a patient, and sometimes it can take years before someone is stabilised. When a patient moves on to another department or clinic, you often get a call. You are told how the patient is doing, whether he or she has started an education or how the day-to-day activities are going. So even when a patient leaves at some point, it's not an 'out of sight, out of mind' situation. You are really involved with the patient, also in the after-care phase.

Of course, I could have chosen an easier path by choosing a non-forensic psychiatric hospital. But these people are also entitled to care and I do it with pleasure. In psychiatry, as I see it, you are never finished. And fair's fair, not everyone wants to or can do this work. You have to be a strong person - not only psychologically, but also physically. This also played a big role for me - that I can be clear on what I want, how I want it, and how we are going to move forward. That, and the trust that one day something will come that benefits someone, has given me the strength to cope. It still does.

From 24/7 to '9 to 5'

Working as a nurse is more often than not a 24/7 service, the care in a hospital doesn't stop at 5:00 PM. The work is done continuously - 24/7 - and you do it with your colleagues according to a rotating work schedule. After a few years, my employer offered me to apply for the position of a medical service nurse at the Intensive Treatment Clinic (ITC). They were setting up a medical service in addition to the existing psychiatric service and were looking for a nurse. I became responsible for all the somatic care and the protocols surrounding it -diabetes, heart problems and other somatic issues. Quite a responsibility, yes, and after so many years as a psychiatric nurse - also a lifestyle change. No longer am I called up at night, because it is now a daytime job from 7:00 to 15:30.

That bit of independence

Everyone has their own motivation for working abroad. I think, for me it was the maternal instinct to survive, in all circumstances, that got me through, especially in the early days. I wanted to be independent, to create my own opportunities and have the will to ensure a good future for my child. An obstacle? I'd think "pfff" for a moment, and then I just carry on my way of getting to where I am now.

Even though the programme was finished, I stayed in contact with Eduployment. Just imagine: you come from Lithuania and you get health insurance, help with your banking affairs and all kinds of formalities. I even received Eduployment's support in managing my taxes. This was a really special arrangement. To this day, I find it miraculous that Eduployment does that.

I was receiving support when it was needed or when I asked for it. Thanks to this, I could adapt and develop in the new country rather easily and at my own pace". I received tailor-made guidance that was right for me.

'Shock Therapy' in Dutch - the first days of the language course

Yeah, I remember those first days of the Dutch language course very well. I'm not saying it was a trauma, but it was tough. My knack for languages was nil. With a mother who is a maths teacher, I am really a maths-oriented person and I thought, "Oh no, where have I gotten myself into!". Only yes, I did have to learn the language. There was no other way. And learning the language at Eduployment happens at a high pace and at a high level. So what did I do? I was learning everything by heart. And then me and my colleagues had to understand that learning new words makes sense only when you understand them in the context of a sentence - a different way of learning, but more fun and more effective. Otherwise, learning at a high pace will not work. Me and my colleagues succeeded. We all passed.

The reception upon our arrival in the Netherlands was well organised. The team I came to work with was well informed by Eduployment about my background. During the first period, we, the "newcomers", had daily evaluation conversations. We were asked about what we had seen / done that day and how we had experienced it. Or sometimes we were simply asked: "How are you?" I had no previous experience of someone asking me that and it certainly was not easy to open myself psychologically and personally to it in the beginning, the language also being still a bit of a challenge. By now I could write, understand and read well, but when speaking I still had that feeling of discomfort / shyness? I thought: "I speak with an accent and I know I am going to make mistakes". However, my Dutch colleagues were always caring, kind and, above all, understanding. They were willing to support and guide me in everything. I have experienced this as a very pleasant period.

The Netherlands, a fairy-tale world to me!

When I look back on that first period in the Netherlands, I really see a fairy-tale world. All those lights in Holland, different cultures, skin colour and the way people treat each other. We didn't have that in Lithuania back then. The people in the Netherlands are so warm towards each other. You then end up in Amsterdam and you see all those traffic lights, they really had a traffic light for everything: for the bus and the tram, an illuminated turn signal to the opera, and the pizzeria! Even seeing a dark-skinned person was special to me. I have never seen anyone with dark skin in Lithuania in my life! Or with a burqa! And then suddenly you are walking around in Amsterdam and you see all these different people. You think, "This is really a fairy tale". It felt just crazy to be able to experience all this. I found it a really special time.

Feeling like a full-fledged Dutch(wo)man

What was the first moment I really felt fully recognised as a Dutch(wo)man? The moment I bought my own house in Amsterdam Noord. My own attitude helped me with that a lot, I could stand on my own two feet very quickly because of it. As well as the new job and the fact that my son came to Holland and we could live together again.

I have a nice family around me, I have a loving husband, a good job and my own house. Of course, I cherish my Lithuanian roots, but the feeling of being a full-fledged Dutch(wo)man is there and will remain.

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