

Interview with Sueli Brodin, forty-one years old, born in Brazil of French and Japanese origin, married to a Dutchman with three children and living in Maastricht/Bunde for fourteen years
Interview date: April 1, 2008

Sueli: My name is Sueli Brodin. I am 41 years old. I come from...well, that is a difficult question. I was born in Brazil. My father is French and my mother is Japanese but she was born in Brazil, so she is Brazilian of Japanese origins. I was born in Brazil, but grew up in Brazil, Pakistan, Japan, France and I met my Dutch husband in Israel. So I have lived the longest time actually here in The Netherlands and I have the Dutch nationality now. So it's always difficult for me to say where I come from. I basically feel a bit Brazilian, a bit French, and probably a little bit Dutch, I guess now. I live in Bunde, which is a small village in the outskirts of Maastricht, and we live because in the beginning we wanted to live in Maastricht but it proved to be too expensive for us. (...) When we came to Maastricht, we didn't have a job and we wanted housing. It was easier to find housing outside of Maastricht than in Maastricht. We like it very much in Bunde, it's quiet and very close to nature. Of course we are very connected to Maastricht. My husband works in Maastricht, I work for an institute in Maastricht (the European Journalism Centre). For my work (...) I am following the news of Maastricht and basically we are very close to Maastricht, but we don't live in Maastricht.

Alexandra: You said you met your husband in Israel. How did that come about? Can you elaborate on that? And then: (...) how did you make the decision to go with him to The Netherlands? That's quite a big step or change in your life...

Sueli: I was in Israel because I...I always wanted to go to Israel. My father had been there when he was young and I grew up with his stories about the Kibbutz and being a volunteer in a Kibbutz. So I was in Paris and working for "Elle" International, a women's magazine, but I was not happy. Too big city, too many people. I went to Israel to work in a Kibbutz as a volunteer and there I met (...) many Dutch volunteers. Actually they were very appreciated because they did all of the good work. My husband was one of the Dutch volunteers. We could have gone back to France and lived there but we also could have come back to The Netherlands, so we chose to come back to The Netherlands. Because my husband had...Well, first of all he didn't speak French and he thought that it would be easier for me to learn Dutch than for him to learn French. He had worked at the employment agency before he went to the Kibbutz, so he knew more or less how things functioned here, how to find a job, how to get registered to find work, and he was convinced that I was going to be able to find work without any problem. So he said: "Let's just go back to The Netherlands. It will be easier for us to settle down (there) than to go to France". And that's how we came to The Netherlands. We first lived in Amersfoort, which is in the centre of the country, and we lived there for a year and a half, saving money to go traveling again. But we didn't want to settle down there, at least I didn't. (...) For me finding work with French was more difficult. I don't speak German. Just with English and a little bit of Dutch I couldn't really find work that I liked, and I wanted to use French. Then I heard about

Maastricht after the treaty. Because it was right after the treaty was signed that we came to live in The Netherlands, and we heard about the international and European institutes in Maastricht. We thought we would come and have a look and luckily we were both able to work for a European institute in Maastricht. So our dream came true, let's say! This is what we were hoping for. I work for the European Journalism Centre as a freelance editor. I used to work for the European Journalism Centre as a project assistant and then my first child was born and I decided to be a housewife and a mother. So I quit, I left the EJC. But we stayed in touch and I started doing some small freelance jobs from home more and more. And then all of a sudden, "Crossroads" (webmagazine for expatriates) was born. This initiative was launched at the end of 2001. It was a journalism project in Maastricht, which was so interesting that I immediately accepted to get involved in that. This is something I could do from home. After one or two years, I started doing the "Media News", which is another initiative of the EJC. So I do two things for the institute from home. I go to the EJC maybe once a month or once every two months, so not very often.

Alexandra: So you speak Dutch, we've heard that. How did you learn Dutch? Was it easy for you? Did it help integrate you into the community? Tell us a little bit about your experiences with the Dutch language.

Sueli: I didn't speak Dutch at all when I first arrived here. Contrarily to what my husband had said it was going to be necessary to learn Dutch to find work, even menial jobs. I was ready to do anything. Coming from the Kibbutz, I just didn't see why there would be a hierarchy in jobs, why a cleaner would be less appreciated than a manager. I was ready to do anything just to work, to keep myself busy. But even to be a cleaner via uitzendbureau, the temporary work agency, it was difficult to find a job because people would say that even if somebody would tell me: "Pas op!" ("Be careful!"), even that I wouldn't understand. So even that I couldn't do. I thought that was so ridiculous. Anyway, then I thought: "OK, then I have to learn Dutch". I started learning Dutch in Amersfoort with other foreigners like me and it was very good actually because I met other foreigners who were in the same situation. Most of them were foreigners like me who had met a Dutch person and who wanted to learn Dutch because they were going to live in The Netherlands for a while. First I thought that it wasn't going fast enough. I was in an evening course because during the day I had finally managed to work for V & D as a cleaning lady. But it wasn't going fast enough. So then I switched to a day course "Intensive Dutch" and within a few months I had the diploma for Dutch for foreigners. Then I switched jobs immediately and I started doing administrative work. And I spoke Dutch all the time with my husband. I really wanted to learn the language to get better jobs, to do administrative jobs, that's what I liked the most. I wanted to work in an office and I needed the Dutch for that. So I finished my course and got the diploma and after that I found a better job. Then when I was here in Maastricht, I had the possibility through the European Journalism Centre to take Dutch courses again, to take language courses, but I chose Dutch again, but this time Dutch for Dutch people. So I studied Dutch together with Dutch students...HAVO, MAVO, what's it called?!? It was secondary school level Dutch. But

that was much more interesting for me. I learned to write letters, write all sorts of texts, read the newspapers, difficult things, literature, we had to read about twenty books in Dutch and present them in Dutch. So everything at a Dutch level, and then I felt really much more confident with the language. Since I've done that course, I just think I am as good as any other Dutch person with my language skills at least.

Alexandra: Do you think it has helped you to integrate in the community of Maastricht or respectively Bunde?

Sueli: Yes, very much so because first of all I read everything that falls under my eyes. I read the newspapers, the local newspapers, I read everything. I can also understand television and I communicate with anybody I want, at school with the parents, with the teachers, with my colleagues. But what I didn't expect when we came to live here is that so many people would speak dialect. That was a big surprise for me. Even when we first had a house here, a studio, the landlord spoke dialect. I didn't understand a word of what he said! So that was a big surprise and I thought that the dialect is something we should also try to learn or understand because people really switch to dialect very easily. As soon as you have three people and two of them speak dialect, they'd rather speak dialect than Dutch. But the dialect is fine with me, it's just that I didn't learn it, so somehow I don't know it yet. I understand a little bit, but not enough. I cannot have a conversation at all in dialect.

Alexandra: So when we come to talking about socialising maybe, do you have any local friends, who also speak the dialect?

Sueli: I have met Dutch people through my children's school because they go to the local Dutch public school. Funnily enough it's not so much through Dutch that I have met people. It is through French or other languages because I speak to my children in French for example in the streets or just in public spaces and at home obviously. But in public spaces I also speak French to my children and people hear that. So they come to me: "Oh, you speak French", and this and that, and then we get talking. Our best friends are people that I met thanks to the French. Just yesterday I was speaking Spanish with a woman I know from Argentina, and another woman came to us and said: "Oh, you speak Spanish...", and she's Dutch. So this is what I like. You just have to speak your own language and people will come to you and you will meet them like this. Our very best friend here in The Netherlands, who lives in Sittard closeby, we met him through a Hebrew course in Maastricht. So it's through other languages that we've met Dutch people who were interested in the same things as we were.

Alexandra: In total, is your circle of friends more made up of (...) foreigners or Dutch people? What would you say? What is the percentage?

Sueli: I must say at the moment I meet a lot of Dutch people, not so much through socialising but because of the school. I just chat with other parents a school. But I really like meeting other foreigners and these are people that I've met at a (..) moment....When I stopped working, I was at home and I was very lonely because at that point I didn't have children yet. I was pregnant and I hadn't met any Dutch people. My colleagues that I knew from work were working, so they were not available during

the day to meet. And so I was very lonely, and this is when I met the International Women's Club. I was at the market and I saw a Japanese looking woman and I went to her and asked if she was Japanese. She was, and she was a member of the club and she introduced me to the club. This is how I met the other foreigners in Maastricht and that was a great thing for me. It really helped me make friends and know people, people in the same situation. (...) It was mostly women. They were married to Dutch men and had Dutch children or bilingual, two-nationality-children. So these people became my friends, and they are still very much, they are really friends. (...) I need both. I really need Dutch friends, because then I feel integrated here, but I need to be able to have foreign friends and I really like having foreign friends.

Alexandra: OK, if we talk about the city of Maastricht now a little bit, since you...well, you live in Bunde but Maastricht is just around the corner and is a very important place for you because that's where you can go shopping and maybe where you have more recreational activities and so forth. So when you first came to Maastricht, what were your impressions? Can you tell us a little bit about that? Do you remember what your first thoughts were coming to this city?

Sueli: Yes, actually it's quite interesting because we came to Maastricht to check the city out. We had decided not to go back to Amersfoort. What happened was that we were in Amersfoort and then we decided to travel. We decided to come back to The Netherlands, but not to Amersfoort. We didn't know where, everything was open. But then we thought: "OK, we're going to visit ten to twelve cities in The Netherlands, maybe one in each province, and see which one we would like best. We started with Maastricht because Maastricht was the place we wanted to visit the most. So we were in Dordrecht and we took the train to Maastricht. We spent a day here and we just fell in love with the city. The first day was really the most memorable day in Maastricht, I suppose. We liked it immediately. We liked the river in the centre of the city, we liked the cobblestone streets, we liked the old buildings, the historical feel of the city, the Sint Pietersberg, the mountain overlooking the city, just the whole atmosphere. The city was very appealing. It was a sunny day. I mean everything looked very beautiful. So we thought: "Why look further? Maastricht is great." (...) That's why I haven't visited many of the other provinces in The Netherlands because we didn't complete our tour. We just stopped in Maastricht. Yes, that's how we decided for Maastricht. We liked it very much from the beginning.

Alexandra: Have any of your observations or has your perception of Maastricht changed throughout time? If you think of then and now, have you gathered more experiences or maybe also negative aspects that you've learned about during your time in Maastricht?

Sueli: I think the city has only got more beautiful since we came here about fourteen years ago. The city has got more beautiful, really. There have been so many improvements. Architectural improvements, the city is very well-kept, very clean, and all the (...) urban projects in Maastricht are only making the city nicer. One of the downsides is that it's really getting difficult to get to Maastricht because when you live outside of Maastricht, parking is expensive, the traffic is crazy to get into

Maastricht. So I often just take the bike, which I'm lucky to do, but sometimes the weather is not good enough, so I find myself not being able to go to Maastricht as often as I would like to, even if it's only 6 km away, just because of transportation problems. So that's something that has grown due to the popularity, I suppose, of Maastricht. In the weekends it's really, really crowded. (...) So people are really discovering Maastricht and seeing how beautiful it is, but (...) I don't know what the solution should be. It's something that has changed in a negative way. What I like about Maastricht very much is the historical aspect of the city. Everywhere you look, you see something that tells you a little bit about the history of the city and this is what I like. I like (...) looking up, looking left, looking right and seeing something that is intriguing and where I'm wondering what it means and what the story behind it is. I like that very much. What I miss very much in Maastricht is a city museum. I don't understand why there isn't a city museum about the history of Maastricht. When I was pregnant with my second child, I think, there was this big exhibit about d'Artagnan, the French musketeer who died here. (...) I missed it because I was pregnant in the eighth or ninth month (...). And it's gone! I don't know if there is going to be another one (=an exhibit), but the whole history of how d'Artagnan died in Maastricht is not shown in any museum in Maastricht and I don't understand why. This is something that would really attract a lot of tourists to Maastricht and interest a lot of people. On "Crossroads" it is one of the best viewed stories and I (...) think the story should really be told in a museum. "Zicht op Maastricht" does this, but you also need to see things. You also have the statue of d'Artagnan in the city, which is very, very beautiful, and you have a small plaque explaining in three lines how d'Artagnan died here, but it's not enough. It's a pity. I think we really need a city museum in the city because it is such a historical city and there is so much to tell. But for the rest, it's really a city in which you like to walk. It's a city with its own pace. You know, you can really stroll and look up and discover new things. I like the open spaces in Maastricht. Many open spaces, many open squares. Plein 1992 is another new big space. The market square is nice, the Vrijthof is nice. (...) The river in the middle creates a lot of space in the city. This I like very much. And the park of course. The park is beautiful. I think it's one of the most beautiful cities in The Netherlands, as far as I know. Well, for a long time I was missing a good book store. Now we have Selexyz and that's absolutely amazing. What they've done with this church is really fantastic. The city can really be proud of this kind of project, I think. Of course you have other book stores, but what I'm looking for in a book shop is English books, so I thought until now you didn't have that many offers. But Selexyz is giving a good offer, but it still can grow and offer more, I think. But it's just beautiful to be there. When I'm in the city, I just go there because it's so beautiful. I'm not interested in cafés because I don't smoke and I don't like smoking areas, so we avoid that. Same goes for restaurants. I'm really longing for this new law that will forbid smoking in these places. And also with children it's more difficult to go to cafés and restaurants, so we don't go to those. I'm not interested in clothing either, so I am not really the shopping type. I am the museum type. We love going to the Natural History museum. We go there very often. We love the fossils that you can see there. For the rest, just strolling into the city and

discovering historical things by ourselves. We always go to visit the city walls (and) the park. I suppose I am very much into history, you know, books, museums and open spaces.

Alexandra: Have you noticed any peculiar differences to your “home culture”, which is a little bit difficult because of course you have a very colourful CV and you have lived in many different countries. But if you maybe compare it (Maastricht) to your home country, Brazil, or maybe also to the time you spent in France, what differences are there between the local culture and also how the locals behave maybe? Any peculiar things where you think: “Hey, this is really typically Dutch and I really had to get used to that first.”

Sueli: Well, first I must say, when we came to live in The Netherlands, my first contact with The Netherlands was in Amersfoort. So for me (...), I had my culture shock there with things being Dutch. I must say here in Maastricht, I have it much less. I don't know whether it is because it is my second city in The Netherlands and I was just growing used to the Dutch way of doing things. But I have the impression that in Maastricht and in South Limburg in general, people are very much Latin. They have this Latin thing. They look physically already like French people. I mean, I can see it in the build of the people. They are less tall...They just have more the Latin look, I suppose. So they are less Dutch to me. They are more European, let's say, not really European, more Latin than Dutch in Maastricht. So I didn't have that much of a culture shock here and I felt very much at home from the beginning. And also that people keep a bit more to themselves. In Amersfoort and in the rest of The Netherlands, also where my husband comes from, Dordrecht, people will talk to you more easily, but they will also say things to you that you haven't asked for. They are a bit more direct. And here people are maybe more distant but also more discreet, I suppose. I'm used to that. I don't say it's good or bad, it's just something that doesn't surprise me. I don't have a problem with it. I feel at home like this.

Alexandra: So you also see Maastricht as your home for the future? I mean, of course your children go to school here now and they grow up bilingually. So you are planning definitely to stay settled here?

Sueli: Yes, we like it very much here. The longer we live here, the more we like it. Even my husband wouldn't like to live anywhere else in The Netherlands. For me, it's really home. My children speak with this nice Limburg accent. I like it very much. I think it's very special to be in a region that has so much history and so much to teach me. I just subscribed to a series of books which is called “The History of Limburg” and I'm reading it. It's brilliant and so interesting. (...) The more things I find out, the more I like it here. No, I don't think I want to live anywhere else.

Alexandra: One last question. Do you have any memorable event that sticks to your mind when you think of Maastricht? Anything like a special day you spent in the city that was exceptionally beautiful or memorable? Or an outstanding event such as the carnival where you'd say: “Yeah, this is really typically Maastricht. If I think of Maastricht, I think of that”. Anything you would like to share with the audience?

Sueli: For me, the day I remember the most is the first day we spent in Maastricht. Because we came here and we liked it very much from the beginning. We walked up to the Sint Pieterberg and we had

the whole view of the city. It was magnificent. The old churches, the old buildings, the colour of the city, the river in the middle...Everything looked just perfect. We thought this is a very nice place to live and it's getting better. It's getting more beautiful with time.

About the photo (see below):

Sueli: OK, so this is the picture that I like very much. My husband is an amateur photographer. He has a very nice camera and he walks around and takes pictures, sometimes because I ask him to for my articles on "Crossroads", but otherwise he just takes photos that he likes because he sees something he would like to photograph. This is a photograph that was taken in Maastricht Stadspark on a nice spring day. It's very sunny and you can see three elderly men sitting on a bench and chatting, or at least two of them seem to be sharing a funny story together because one of them is laughing. It is not entirely focused and it's not entirely well-framed. You can see that it was taken on a hunch. It is a very spontaneous photograph and what I like is the moment that it shows. It shows elderly men and I would really like to know what they are laughing about, what they are telling each other. They look like local residents who have probably lived, I assume, in Maastricht all their lives, and I would really like to know their story and know what they are telling each other. Probably I wouldn't understand what they are saying and what they are laughing about because they are speaking dialect, but still I would like to be sitting there next to them and sharing that story, sharing their conversation.



Photo by Herman Pijpers

Links:

Sueli is the webmaster and member of the International Women's Club South Limburg:

<http://www.iwc-sl.nl/>

Sueli is furthermore the editor of "Crossroads", a web magazine for expatriates from the European Journalism Centre: <http://crossroads.journalismcentre.com/>