



A philologist, a programmer, a diplomat

2014-04-03

On untypical educational background, supporting entrepreneurs and canoeing. An interview with Ellen Germain, the United States Consul General in Krakow.

Krakow - the Open City: You are a philologist and a computer programmer – a rather untypical educational background for a diplomat. What influenced your choice of career in diplomacy?

Ellen Germain: Well, you're right! It's not a traditional way to join the diplomatic service but - at least in the USA - there are quite a few people in the Foreign Service who have more unusual backgrounds. I was always interested in the foreign policy; in living overseas; in different cultures. I was interested in many things. I studied medieval literature, computer science and I was focusing on those two areas for a long time. Then, I was actually talking to a friend who mentioned the Foreign Service and the Foreign Service Exam. I thought: "Wow! That is what I was interested in when I was at the university but I have done other things since then." So I thought why not try the exam and see what happens. So I did and I passed. I thought now that I have passed, I need to join the Foreign Service and see what it is like. That was 18 years ago, so I think I found the thing that I really like doing. It is a wonderful career for me because I can do different things; every few years I am posted to a different country; I follow a different set of issues. I like to say I have a short attention span, which is a joke, but I am in fact interested in many things, so the Foreign Service is a wonderful career for me. I have focused on a couple of general regions; one is Eastern Europe and Russia and the other is the Middle East.

KOC: You also worked as a journalist...

EG: Yes, I was doing science journalism; writing about scientific and technical topics for general public; for general interest magazines and that was because I have always been interested in science and language and the humanities and that was a way to combine these interests.

KOC: Diplomacy is, in fact, a combination of your interests...

EG: It really is because I have worked on what we call science and technology policy in other places and here in Krakow I have been very fortunate in discovering that Krakow is a real hotbed of technology start-up companies. For me, a former computer scientist, that has been great. I have been making lots of connections in that community trying to find out how the consulate can help build bridges between the US and Poland when it comes to high tech innovation. Building bridges between Silicon Valley and the Polish high tech entrepreneurial community is one of my passions. It is one of the things I am really focused on while I am here. I think we have managed to do some interesting things in this field.

KOC: In the US it is an important trend to support the entrepreneurial spirit in students. Is this what you plan to do also here in Krakow?

EG: Absolutely! That is one of things I want to do here. The consulate is interested in working with all the universities and institutions in southern Poland. So far we have had programs with the AGH and Google for Entrepreneurs to run a start-up competition for young entrepreneurs



who are just starting out. I think it is a wonderful way to encourage students to pursue high tech and their entrepreneurial spirit. It is wonderful for Poland and the U.S. because many of those young leaders and entrepreneurs or even students go to the U.S. to study or open their own companies there. I am very eager to do that and we are always looking for opportunities to work with students and universities.

KOC: I know that you enjoy canoeing. We do not have the Grand Canyon here but can you still pursue your passion while in Krakow?

EG: I did a lot of white water rafting at the university and afterwards. I loved that. I spent almost two weeks rafting in the Grand Canyon on the Colorado River.

KOC: It was amazing when we discovered that the Bystrze kayaking club was going to do the long-awaited trip through the Grand Canyon. It was a wonderful opportunity for us to support a Polish effort to visit America; to promote tourism and one of the great natural wonders of the US. That was how I discovered that there was some kayaking and white water sport here in Krakow.

In fact they invited me to one of their trainings on the Vistula. It was wonderful! I had great time even though I fell out of the kayak and into the water but that was o.k. I would very much like to do that again in spring. I would also like to go on some expedition with them.

I went rafting on the Dunajec in the late summer. It is not white water but it is still beautiful. Part of what I like being on the water is just seeing the beautiful landscape and the quiet. I really saw that on the Dunajec in Szczawnica, it is just gorgeous. So there are ways to pursue my passion here.

KOC: You have been here in Krakow for 1.5 years now do you think Krakow is a place where you could stay?

EG: Yes, definitely! I am already staying here and living here very happily. I love Krakow. I feel as if I am at home here. It feels very home-like and friendly. The people have been incredibly welcoming and friendly. I just love the feeling of walking around the city and feeling that I know the places and I know the people. There is lot of possibility for walking here. I love to walk everywhere. It is an old city; a medieval and renaissance city and, as someone who studied medieval literature, I love living in the middle of that.

KOC: So you enjoy the atmosphere of Krakow?

EG: The atmosphere of Magiczny Kraków..., yes!

KOC: Do you miss the hustle and bustle, the energy of New York City?

EG: I do sometimes. I am from New York and I love the city also. but: każde miejsce ma swój czar. I really do believe that. I was back in New York in December for a few weeks and It was wonderful being back there but I was really happy to come back to Krakow; to my home. This is my home now. So I love New York but I also love Krakow.



**Magiczny
Kraków**

KOC: So your favorite place in Krakow is...

EG: Am I allowed to have two?

KOC: Of course, you can mention as many as you wish!

EG: One of the first places I visited when I came to Krakow was the Collegium Maius and I love it. For the 1.5 years that I have been here that is one of my favorite places. I love the history, the atmosphere in the wonderful room when they perform the ceremonies but also the museum. The rooms have a feel of history and wonder. After all it is here where Copernicus studied. The courtyard of Collegium Maius to me is one of the most lovely places in Krakow I just love it! I seize every opportunity to go to visit and I take all of my guests there.

The other place that I really love, is the park across the street from my house – Deptak Młynówka; the path up to Bronowice. It is just lovely and I walk there for kilometers almost every weekend. It is beautiful and there are Krakovians there; families with children and grandparents. I just love being part of that -feeling that I am a part of everyday life here in Krakow. Those are two of my favorite places and things to do here.

KOC: Thank you!