

Sylvia Jacob

a lawyer of two cultures

“Don’t edit your approach. Don’t hold yourself back. You have obviously changed and assimilated a culture. To just try to fit in would be a mistake. You have become a richer personality as a result of this experience in another culture.”

Words by **Virginia Gillespie**

Photo by **Myungsook Lee**

Born in Germany, Sylvia Jacob grew up in both Germany and Canada. She later decided to settle in Germany because she saw this as an opportunity to work in a European environment and also she wanted to give back to Canada.

She says, “The biggest obstacle in trading between nations is the lack of the ability to communicate effectively. I am of two cultures and speak both languages fluently. I can bridge the communications gap. I studied law in Canada and through working in Germany I learned the differences between the two systems. This is how my practice developed.

Sylvia found many challenges doing business in Germany, noting that law is a male-dominated profession and it is somewhat unusual for a woman to set up a law practice. She notes, “We as Canadians are more informal and relaxed in dealing with people. Germans are fairly formal. For example, Canadians often are introduced and call each other

by their first names. In Germany this could be extremely rude.”

She offers herself as a resource to consulates and embassies to give advice and in this way gets referrals. “My role with consulates is always as a communicator. My time in Canada prepared me for a multicultural setting. So, when asked to advise organizations that are not German, I bring to the table this sensitivity. A foreigner comes to a country not understanding the system and why things are done a certain way. I can help convey the different mentalities and legal underpinnings, but also the similarities.”

In the Munich office of Jacob Associates she works with Canadians. And, she works with Canadian clients in Canada via Internet, telephone and even videoconferencing. She visits them when possible in order to better know the people she deals with. “Canadian multiculturalism has a lot to offer to the planet. That’s why I like to return to Canada and feel my roots in Toronto and

Vancouver - to see possibilities.”

She also has German clients who want to do business in Canada. “Germans see Canada as a safe haven where they can purchase real estate and invest in businesses. They perceive that doing business in Canada will help them in doing business in the U.S. When working internationally they know it is important to do business in both countries, but often they start in Canada.”

“Canadians are very circumspect and accommodating of others. So I try to bring that to the table. In fact, I act as a moderator. I can direct conversations and put impulses in. I can also be sensitive about people who are not being heard and involve them in the dialogue.”

Sylvia tries to bring a bit of Canada into Germany. For example, this summer she helped organize a Canada Day celebration in Munich. She recalls, “There are stereotypical elements. When we organize a Canadian cultural event the Germans often think of Canada in terms



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of Indians. This is rooted in the novels of the early 20th century author Karl Mai, who wrote stories that were pure fantasy about parts of Canada where Indians and Germans had adventures. A lot of the German perception of Canada is rooted in romanticism. So, at our events there are typically many videos showing landscapes of mountains, sunsets, lakes and canoeing.”

She has a great appreciation for Canadian artists and helps promote them. Many handle contracts directly with galleries, so she supports them in other ways. She says, “I try to support Canadian artists visiting Germany and certainly women exhibitors. A few years ago I was involved in the ‘In Your Dreams Exhibit’ that was tri-cultural. Ten each of German, Canadian and Australian artists explored the question of whether there is a culturally specific way of dreaming.”

She often supports groups of people at Amerika Haus in central Munich as a member of the Bayerische Ameri-

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canisches Zentrum - BAZ for short. It was created for the purpose of bringing together Canadians, Americans and Latin Americans for Germans to visit and explore politics, art and literature. Her support is mostly outside of regular work to encourage the flowering of national culture.

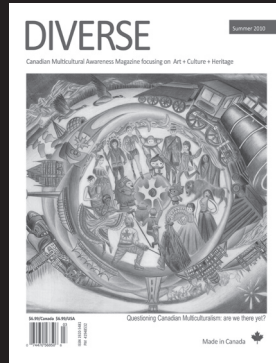
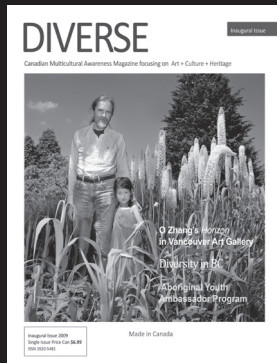
Sylvia decorates her firm with Canadian art saying, “I want people to feel a connection with Canada. Short of putting a Canadian Flag in my office the artwork says that when you step into my space, this is a place that honours Canadian culture.”

Her vision for the future is clear. “I will continue to bridge North Atlantic cultures. I want to help Germans understand how to be effective when doing business in Canada and to be viewed as someone who can educate Germans to do business in a way that is more proactive and preventative rather than after the fact. Canadians wanting to do business in Europe should also understand

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the legal and cultural aspects.”

She notes that Jacob Associates is the only Canadian law firm in Germany that offers training and articling of students offshore in Germany to sensitize Canadian law students to international opportunities and a larger understanding of Canadian business.

“We have different cultures working at the law firm – Canadian, German and students from New Zealand, Australia, Ireland and England,” she says. “I try to provide space for people from different cultures to come together.”

“Law is formalistic. You can’t just come together to create it because law is already a system. But, you can be creative in terms of putting together different

ideas say from a New Zealand or an Irish student that you wouldn’t necessarily have when working only with Germans or only with Canadians.”

Sylvia has advice for others who are of two cultures. “Don’t edit your approach. Don’t hold yourself back. You have obviously changed and assimilated a culture. To just try to fit in would be a mistake. You have become a richer personality as a result of this experience in another culture.” 

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