

Quo Vadis, USA? – der Podcast des Heidelberger Center for American Studies

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„Farewell Consul General Lacina – Looking Back on Three Years in Southwest Germany“

Patricia Lacina, U.S. Consul General Frankfurt

Anja Schüler: Hello and welcome to a new episode of "Quo Vadis USA?" the podcast of the Heidelberg Center for American Studies at the University of Heidelberg, my name is Anja Schüler. In today's episode, we won't be asking so much where the United States are headed. Rather, I will be talking to a person who is on the move a lot. My guest is U.S. Consul General Patricia Lacina, who is about to leave the U.S. consulate in Frankfurt after a three year tour here. Almost half of her time was impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. We will talk about her experience as consul general in extraordinary times. So welcome to the HCA podcast, Consul General Lacina.

Patricia Lacina: Thank you so much, Anja. I am thrilled to be here. This is a very exciting opportunity for me, and I'm so happy that I was able to do this before, sadly, I have to depart Germany at the end of July.

Dr. Anja Schüler: Now you are a career diplomat with three decades of experience in diplomacy, management, and policy coordination. Let's start out with giving our listeners a few impressions of your job. What does a typical day at work look like for you?

Patricia Lacina: So, that's a bit difficult, to give a typical day. Every day is a bit different, obviously, depending on what is happening; if I'm doing outreach, if I'm doing a bit of travel. But in general, I am leading our largest consulate in the world with an enormous number of employees and a variety of federal agencies from the United States who are represented in Frankfurt. Some of them are representatives for all of Germany. We do everything from policy coordination with Berlin, of course, to assisting American citizens. We do VIP visits. We also work very closely with our law enforcement colleagues in Germany at all levels to coordinate different areas of law enforcement. We are always working to keep people safe, you know, building our community and representing the United States in the best possible light that we can.

Anja Schüler: I imagine Covid presented an additional challenge in that work, but let's maybe talk first a little bit about your previous posts, which included Vienna, Brussels, Buenos Aires, Nairobi, Moscow, Bogota, and Mexico City. Now, I know that you're a diplomat, and as a diplomat, you will answer in a diplomatic way, but what places do you remember as particularly impressive on that list?

Patricia Lacina: A lot of people ask me that question, I've had many journalists ask me and I'm not sure what they're looking for, but I have to be honest when I say that every post is memorable and special for some reason, it may be an unexpected reason, but it can be anything ... for example, my first tour in Buenos Aires, we had an attempted coup by the military. So that was very memorable. We hosted the Academy Awards in Buenos Aires. One of the segments was filmed at the Colón Opera, and I got to meet Charlton Heston at a reception. So, you know, there are always things like that that happen that are very memorable. You know, my daughter was born when I was posted in Bogota. So, that's something that obviously changed my life but makes that city very special, and besides that, my husband is from Colombia. You know, it could be just friendships you made there or like in Cairo, evacuating people during the Arab Spring; in Mexico City, amazing culture and food and using my Spanish every day. Moscow, excitement and challenges in the early days after the breakup of the Soviet Union ... Every post has amazing opportunities to make memories, to connect with the people who are there, to just really experience something outside of what you would expect to experience in the United States. So, I think that I could tell you something special about every city I've been in and definitely every country that I've served in.

Anja Schüler: So I think your message also is a little bit, expect the unexpected, maybe.

Patricia Lacina: Right. And be open to all of those opportunities that you have to share with people, to eat new foods, you know, to seek cultural experiences that you wouldn't maybe imagine that you would participate in.

Anja Schüler: So tell us, what were your expectations when you first came to Germany? I know this is your second posting in Germany. Which expectations could Germans live up to? And what surprised you when you came to Germany?

Patricia Lacina: So, I first came here in 2006, and I spent two years here, but I came to Germany the first time when I was a university student, and I traveled all around Europe. So, my first experience with Germany really was, you know, in the 1980s. And that was a completely different Germany even when I served in, you know, in the the mid 2000s, right 2006, You know, when I was a poor student, it was horribly cold winter. I remember staying in little Gasthauses and, you know, eating tons of Gulaschsuppe. That was like one of the few words I learned in German. But when I came back then, the first time, I really grew to enjoy Frankfurt, although in my job actually I worked more building capacity in the smaller embassies in the region, like in the Baltics. I spent a lot of time on the road and I knew Frankfurt Airport very well. But what I didn't expect when I was assigned here as the Consul General ten years later, I knew it would be a very interesting job and very different from the one I'd had before, but I honestly, Anja, I did not expect to love it so much. I did not expect such a warm, warm welcome from all of the people that I met and interacted with, be they Germans, immigrants from other places, refugees, Americans who live here

permanently. I felt like people understood how important it was for me representing the United States, and they really respected that, and they invited me to so many things to talk about the United States and our policies and about which direction our relationship was going. And that was really an opportunity for me to engage and build lots of positive relationships. I would say the area where I really did a lot of outreach that I didn't expect to do was with schools and universities. I just loved going to the high schools, getting those really tough questions from kids and waiting for me to answer. And it wasn't a podcast, I didn't have time to really think, I had to really engage on my feet and to get them to think about what their attitudes were. I always felt so invigorated afterwards, and I also always felt like democracy is in pretty good hands. These kids are amazing. They're going to do great things. I'm sad to leave that part, but I feel like it was it was a very, very gratifying experience.

Anja Schüler: Now, I know your background is in education, and I can imagine how much you enjoyed the visits at those schools. And I'm sure they were very memorable. So what's the most memorable thing about your time here? Is it about encounters at schools like the one you mentioned, or is it about meeting interesting or prominent people? What would you say was maybe your most memorable encounter during your time now in Germany?

Patricia Lacina: It's hard to narrow it down to just one. I would say that one of the things that I really, really enjoyed and I was very gratified to see when I would go to these high schools was how a lot of the really outspoken students were girls, were females and had a real interest in engaging, and I loved that. That was so exciting. And at the same time, I was often asked to do things in Women's Fora. I remember doing something with a women's group in Frankfurt. And we had a space at that a law office; McKenzie let us use their space. And I thought I was going to talk about policy. And so I thought, well, we'd have I don't know, you know, maybe thirty women show up, and we had like 200. It was really so overwhelming to see how much people wanted to engage and how much women really wanted to engage. So, that was that was terrific. But whenever you do a job like this, of course, part of the job is you meet people you wouldn't ordinarily get to meet and some of the people that I met that, of course, stayed with me. Fürst von Löwenstein and his family, they invited me to participate with their foundation in a sustainable weekend at their castle, it was so amazing to listen to him tell stories about the Americans in the post-war when he was a kid, and just such a lovely, lovely family. That was really something that I will cherish always. But also when I was in Heidelberg before, I got to meet President Steinmeier. And it was funny because I wanted to meet him but of course his security didn't want me anywhere near him. So, one of our staff members, she kind of winked at me and kind of motion to me that she would figure out a way for me to meet him. And then as they were distracted, making sure I didn't talk to him, she slipped around and said, hey, do you want to meet the U.S. Consul General? And he said, sure. So I got to meet him and we talked about Iowa and cows and it was lovely. He was so charming, and that was really special.

But I think probably something that touched me really deeply emotionally and that I will take with me, Anja, was going to Stuttgart and talking to two of the young women who were brought by Baden-Württemberg in the program where they brought the young Yazidi women. We spoke through a translator. I have to say that I just admired their courage and their fortitude, and they were younger than my daughter. And to hear what they had been through, and they were so honest in sharing that with me, was really a humbling experience, but also made me realize how important that program that Baden-Württemberg had sponsored was, and how much good they had done, and how these young women now were determined to build on that experience and talk to people about it and educate the world about what had happened and make new lives here. That was really incredible.

Anja Schüler: So that's a lot of very impressive encounters to take with you to your next posting. We were talking about surprises earlier. And probably the biggest surprise of your German tour was that you spent a large part of it in the lockdown. So, how did Covid affect your work? And maybe was there some positive impact, some takeaways for the future?

Patricia Lacina: I didn't ever expect to work anywhere during a pandemic, and I remember at the beginning, we all thought it would last a couple of months. I was incredibly impressed by my team at the consulate, how quickly we were able to move into home office. If you would have asked me a year before that, I would have said there's no way we can get a thousand plus people in home office overnight. And we basically within a couple of days were able to do that. So, that was so gratifying and so impressive. And it showed the importance of that teamwork, of being prepared, of having an amazing I.T. team and solid platforms, so that was really creative work at its best. I think some of the challenges, of course, are maintaining that team, that unity, remotely, you know, if you never see anyone in person, that's a challenging situation. And of course, you know how the foreign service works, we have a big transfer cycle every summer. So, we had people who came last summer. They had to quarantine, they went right into home office after quarantine, so we had people who had not physically met each other, who worked on the same teams. And that is really challenging. My hat's off to my supervisors and senior leadership at the consulate. People made that work and made people feel a part of the team. And the community really reached out to people who were in quarantine and then afterwards, even though doing things remotely, to make people feel a part of the community. So, I feel like that the pandemic really did strengthen our sense of community and reinforce for people how important that community is, whether it's just your little pod, your next door neighbors or somebody that you get along with, or the entire community, your entire office, all those connections are really, really important. And on the plus side, I think, there were a lot of people who appreciated being able to spend less time commuting, you know, some of our local staff live quite far away. You know, many had vulnerable family members or were vulnerable themselves. So, the fact that we really prioritized taking care of them, I think was important and made people feel very

valued. And so that's another thing that I think we really needed to reinforce. But most of all, I think, we all learned how much we need each other and that sometimes we do need a physical presence that, you know, that physical contact and seeing each other face to face you can't replace it. So, I feel like those were some of our key lessons that we learned during the pandemic. And I'm sure there'll be more to come as we come out of the pandemic and figure out how to work in a hybrid way.

Anja Schüler: Well, but knowing that many of you in the foreign service spend a lot of time far apart from friends and family, for example, in the United States, surely this must have affected your personal life as well, sort of the other way around. Did this shift to a digital life, maybe make staying in touch easier as well?

Patricia Lacina: I think it was a mixed bag for people. If you had already an established way, like I always talk to my mother twice a week, I just, you know, continued that during the pandemic; my husband was living in Milan at the time, which, of course, was one of the first epicenters. But then you also have the added part that you're worrying about people who are far away, that you can't do anything about that worry except continue to reach out to them and reinforce things like, be careful, don't go anywhere, wash your hands, wear your mask, all of that. So, I think what it did for me, for example, my mother, she was quite elderly and had no Internet, and plus was nearly blind. So wouldn't have used the Internet if she had had it, so I think there are some challenges that people had to overcome. It wasn't everybody who could just leap into an online platform and make it work. So, trying to figure out what's your process going forward for some people was a challenge. But one of the things that I discovered was I focused a lot more on friends and family that maybe I wouldn't ordinarily keep such close tabs on and be in such close touch with but especially people who lived alone, like one of my friends who had a new granddaughter and couldn't see her, so reaching out to them more often was one of the things that I did. And I know that other people had their own way of doing things. Maybe they did things for people, their next door neighbors or knew someone in the community who was a bit older and volunteered to do shopping for them. So, I think everybody reached out in their own way to do it. Maybe we were better prepared in the foreign service but at the same time, we're used to just hopping on a plane and going wherever you want to go, and that, of course, that option was closed to most people. So, we all had a bit of adjusting to do and recalibrating how we kept in touch with people.

Anja Schüler: Let's talk about another big change during your time in Frankfurt, the switch from the Trump to the Biden administration. During the Trump administration, we have seen some fundamental changes in German-U.S. relations, and now some things are changing back. Trade policies, for example, seem to have normalized; another thing that Germans were concerned with were the U.S. troops. They will be staying in Germany. How would you sum up transatlantic relations during the Trump administration, and what has changed since Joe Biden took office?

Patricia Lacina: I think it's hard to sum up the relationship, there's no real catchy phrase that you can use for an entire four years of an administration, because, of course, it's an arc: You start at one place, and something happens, and policies change, and then they go back a bit. As a professional diplomat, we of course carry out the administration's policies and a lot of what our job is is to explain those policies and clarify them and work with the officials in whatever country that we are assigned to, be they local officials, regional officials, or federal officials. We actually had a lot of successes and good conversations. I think many Germans would tell you that the conversations that we had regarding funding of NATO, the importance of NATO, some trade issues, issues with China, Nordstream II, while they were difficult conversations, some of them were very necessary conversations. And that's the job of us professional diplomats, to take the policies that are made in Washington and to translate them and work with people that we already are working with locally or at the federal level to figure out how we are going to go forward on those policies, whether we can find common ground. And all of that continued to happen as it does through any administration. You know, we spend our entire tours building relationships, having difficult conversations, but also having conversations about, ok, we agree on this, how are we going to go forward? You know, how are we going to combat anti-Semitism together? How are we going to combat domestic extremism together? How are we going to try and make the economy better for both our countries?

We did a lot of that under the Trump administration, we did amazing promotions of direct foreign investment in the United States and vice versa, Americans investing in Germany. We continue to have incredible response for people who want to invest in the U.S. and Americans who want to invest in Germany. And that has continued over several administrations. So, one of the things I like to ask people to do is to focus on not the rhetoric, but the outcomes. You know, what are really the facts on the ground? What actually happened, not what did people get excited about hearing or reading or but what actually was the outcome? And then you can have a real conversation about how has this changed? How has that changed? And I will be honest, I think the tone of some of the rhetoric in the past administration was very upsetting to many people, not just Germans. But when you talk about the actual substance and what it is we're trying to do, there was a lot of agreement on that. So, one of the things now is the tone is very different, and so what we would want to do is focus on, where we are now, how are we going to go forward together, as allies, as partners, not just with Germany, but with all of the E.U.? We have so many so many big problems that we need to work with each other to solve. It's not just how to combat the current pandemic, it's how to prevent another one, it's climate change, it's, you know, restoring economic health, it's making sure, as the president said in his speech yesterday or the day before: He wrote a really, really enlightening OP ED piece in *The Washington Post* about why he's coming to Europe, to rally democracies and how important that is and that we all together have to fight for democracies to strengthen the United Nations. There's a whole litany of things that we really have to work on together. So, we all hope that that the conversations are: Here's how we're going to go forward.

Anja Schüler: I would absolutely agree with you that; we need to look at outcomes, and we often need to look at what's happening at the local level to maybe estimate relations between countries. But I still have to ask the diplomat another question, because I know that many of our listeners are very eager to find out when the new U.S. ambassador will arrive in Berlin. So, when can we expect to welcome him or her?

Patricia Lacina: Did you ever used to watch Johnny Carson? Remember when he did *The Tonight Show*? He used to do this skit called "The Great Carnac." And he would put these cards, he wouldn't know what the card said, and he would put it up to his head and then he would say the answer, I'm not going to do that because I'll be totally wrong, but I think one of the reasons why there has been no announcement made about really any ambassadors to Europe is that the Biden-Harris administration wants to get the right people in those positions. And if you hurry and you make these snap announcements, it's not going to be as good of a slate of ambassadors, as if you vet them carefully, interview them carefully, make sure that you do everything in the right way and deliberately. And so, that's why I think they haven't done that. And they're trying to fill senior positions in the State Department as well, and if you look at the order, you know, the cascade, those positions then cascade down into the ambassadorships, and we're not there yet. And it's just been slower than people thought it would be to get these confirmations. So, we just have to be patient, and I think the wait will be worth it. I'm sure that many people, when the president is at NATO or at the G-7, people will ask him the same thing. And they might get their response directly from him, but I haven't even heard a rumor of who it might be. So, I'm just the wrong person to ask.

Anja Schüler: I wasn't expecting you to name names ... but you have to understand that we're excited about this, and we're very eager to find out who it is going to be. So, let's maybe conclude this conversation with a look at your personal future. And I almost want to ask: "Quo Vadis, Consul General?" – where will your next tour take you? I'm sure you know by now and also, please tell us what you will miss about living in Germany.

Patricia Lacina: OK, so I have to say I have to give you a little background here, Anja. Finding yet another position in the State Department for me was not very straightforward this time around. And so, I'm so sympathetic to these young people who are looking for positions and get rejected and think like, oh, now what am I going to do? You know, I was on the short list for several really, really great jobs and someone else was selected. And when you're at this level, you have to understand your competition is incredible. And so, you know, you're not going to get selected for every job. And you have to have a resilient ego and say, ok, but there's the perfect job for me out there somewhere, I just have to find it. And I would like young people to think about that. Just, you know, just keep asking, keep giving your CV, and just keep going to interviews. And somebody will say, I really like your "stick-to-it"-ness and

I'm going to hire you for a job. So, that was kind of my attitude. And I actually literally only accepted a job on Thursday. So, if we had done this last week, I would have still said I don't know where I'm going, but now I can share with you that I am going to be the deputy chief of mission in, drumroll, New Delhi, India.

Anja Schüler: Congratulations!.

Patricia Lacina: Thank you. What will I miss about Germany? So many things. Oh, so many things. I will miss all of my German counterparts, all the great friends I've made here, the amazing German towns to go and visit that are so beautiful. I will miss the Kleinmarkthalle [in Frankfurt]. I will miss all these lovely open air markets. I will miss wine festivals that eventually we will be doing again after this pandemic. I will miss the Christmas markets. I will miss so many things about Germany. But I'll take them with me in my heart, and I know that I'm going to come back. I will be back to Germany. So, not as the Consul General, just as a tourist and as a fan of Germany and Germans but I definitely will be back, Anja.

Anja Schüler: We're absolutely looking forward to that. Thank you so much, Consul General Patricia Lacina. It's been absolutely fabulous talking to you, and we wish you all the best for your next tour. You have been listening to the HCA podcast coming to you from the University of Heidelberg. My name is Anja Schüler and on behalf of my team, I would like to thank you for tuning in today. Our podcast will be back in two weeks to report about an ongoing research project at the HCA. My guest will be Wolfgang Widder, and we will be talking about the Klein family, a Jewish family from the town of Walldorf, just south of Heidelberg, who sought exile in the United States in the 1930s. So, I'm looking forward to another interesting conversation, and it would be great if you joined us. Stay tuned and please stay healthy.