

Interview with Mr. Michael Reiss von Filski, Estonian Honorary Consul in Zürich

We met our Honorary Consul, Mr Michael Reiss von Filski on a day when Estonians had a chance to apply for passports and ID- cards. So many Estonians have been welcomed by him since his appointment in March 2021. We had a talk in a very warm and welcoming atmosphere, in a room, where we also greeted our Estonian delegation in June 2021 when the new Honorary Consulate was first opened.

If you could define yourself leaving out all professional duties and family - who would you be or what would you be?

You are starting with a very tough question. After reflection, I might want to think of myself as a breeze of the ocean that is all-embracing, because I like to be involved in many different layers and create a pleasant atmosphere for everybody. That's how I would want to see me crediting your very philosophic question.

Coming to reality: what has formed you to become who you are today?

I was born in Switzerland, Zürich. Grew up in Zollikon. There are many aspects that formed me. One was that for me it was really normal to be grown up in a mixed environment. My late mother was half Swiss, half Spanish, half from Thurgau, half from Madrid. My late father was born in Budapest to Austrian-Hungarian-German parents. He had to escape in 1957, which was the very last chance for him to run away. And in this environment of having a mixed background, which for me was pretty normal, we would speak Spanish, German and Swiss German and so on. That's how I grew up.

And also, absorbing to a certain extent some of the not so nice parts that my father had experienced. I didn't fully understand that when I was a small child, but when I was an adolescent, I realized, that there were dramatic

challenges in his life, political prosecution, pressure of communism – and that marked my way of thinking, my liberal, proactive thinking and complete rebut towards totalitarian regimes that are oppressing people and depriving them of their fundamental rights.

How have you determined yourself as a result?

I am Swiss, but also with an international twist.

To my great surprise, I noticed, when I was a small child that being mixed was sort of not what everybody liked, we are talking about the early 80's. It was a bit of a burden. In the later stage however, when I went to gymnasium in Küsnacht, I noticed it became a great advantage, because I also spoke Spanish and French. It was easy for me to master foreign languages.

And all of the sudden this has, thank God, changed in Switzerland that the concept of having reservations towards foreigners has been mitigated. And we have amazing people from all over the world, to be more specific also the Estonian community as a shining example. A lot of people who live here have adapted the lifestyle and they have somehow become Swiss, some are in the process of becoming Swiss, some are Estonians, but have Switzerland as their new home. And they feel fully integrated here. They don't feel suppressed, sad, or homesick. I think this is wonderful. It is giving an additional strength to Switzerland, but also making it possible that different cultures can grow together and make the best out of it.

Where could we meet you during the weekend?

It could be in my living room reading or playing with my kids (*edit. he has two kids*). It could be very much in Thurgau, where I am emotionally very rooted. A place called Steckborn, where my Swiss family has been for almost for 990 years (documented). It is completely different

from Zürich. It is very rural and people are very open-minded. And I enjoy it very much.

If somebody might get up very early in the morning, they might see me running. Or gardening in Zürich. That's also an option.

Are you a mountain person or a lake person?

Rather a lake person. Bodensee.

Have you visited Estonia? Had you visited it before becoming an Honorary Consul?

Yes, I was fortunate enough to go to Estonia already 15 years ago. In my professional life, I run a network of law and accounting firms as its global CEO. This network has 860 offices worldwide and two of them are in Estonia: a law firm and an accounting firm.

In those circumstances, I had the chance to meet the first Estonians abroad and afterwards, I also travelled myself to Estonia and developed professional relationships and also private friendships.

I really liked Estonia very much and I like the people. I feel very fortunate to have had a very positive and meaningful professional and personal ongoing exchange with Estonia.

Is there a place you really like in Estonia?

Many! Many islands I haven't visited yet are on my to-do list. But it's difficult to say. I like the old town because of its traditional character, because it has been kept like a living museum. But then you also see a lot of innovation in Tallinn with modern buildings, with very creative businesses there. You have the traditional part and the modern part and they go very well together.

On the other hand you have pure nature. And where there is nobody, there is still internet, but there is nobody. That is also very appealing to me. I wouldn't focus on one specific area. I am keen to discover some more places. And also my family keeps

pushing me to go to Estonia, as they have not yet been there.

Do you already have an Estonian ID? Are you an e-resident?

Not yet. I'm planning to. Actually, there was an attempt to have a conference with all Honorary Consuls from all over the world in Tallinn in July 2021 and there was the idea to give e-residency to all of them who don't have it yet, but this conference was postponed due to Covid-19.

So it is not necessary to have it in order to carry out the Honorary Consul duty?

It is highly encouraged, but it is not necessary. To be precise, the administrative work of the Honorary Consul is very un-electronic, it is rather paper-heavy. The administrative part of this work is handing out ID's and passports, not issuing them, but handing out in person, filling out and signing certificates to return back to Estonia in case the passport or ID was lost or stolen. It is very papery work.

In my function as an honorary consul I have to follow the rules of the consular handbook, these are the measures given by the Estonian government, police and border guard and I execute them as required, of course.



What is the story of you becoming the Honorary Consul of Estonia?

There's a funny story of how it all started. About five-six years ago a lawyer and an friend of mine, who is based in Innsbruck approached me and said: "I've been invited to

become an Honorary Consul in Innsbruck. Is that something that is interesting in your opinion?" I answered that it is dependent on the country, that there are some countries that are more appealing than the other ones. He said that it is for Estonia. For which I responded that he should absolutely go for it!

Then he asked if I could provide him with a professional reference letter and as we had been working together in legal fields and in the executive committee of the firm I am CEO, I was delighted to write the reference letter.

Years later he reached out to me based on the sad fact that my predecessor, Mr Hans Graf had passed away and that the Estonian Embassy was looking for a new Honorary Consul. He asked if I knew somebody who could take over and I was ready to give it a thought, thinking of some of my contacts in Zurich. Then he said: "Actually, I thought of you". I was very flattered, but I hadn't thought of it.

The Embassy in Vienna wanted to meet different candidates. It is a careful strategic choice and no coronation, where a lot of elements play a role. My friend suggested to meet Ambassador Toomas Kukk and take it up from there. The choice of an Honorary Consul of Estonia is at the entire discretion of the Ministry of Foreign affairs and several interviews and hearings take place before an appointment is made.

When Ambassador Kukk said that they would be pleased if I would consider applying, then I needed a professional reference letter. So I called my friend again and told him: "Now you are the Honorary Consul of Estonia and it is your turn to write a reference letter."

What have been the experiences during the past 6 months with Estonians?

Absolutely wonderful, very positive ones. The Estonian community is very keen to be in touch. I think they also appreciate that I always ask if I can call them by their first names and invite everybody to do the same with me. I

want to be an accessible and approachable honorary consul. And to be in service to the Estonian community. That's my mission.

Before I was asked if I could be interested in becoming Estonian honorary consul I had actually had no contact with the Estonian community in Switzerland, although I had been to Estonia many times. That was also then, when I was having my first conversations with Ambassador Toomas Kukk, I told him I knew Estonia and I have friends from Estonia, but I had no connection to the Estonian community in Zürich. So, if there were other people whose qualifications or possibilities to become Honorary Consul were more suitable than mine, I would not take away this opportunity from somebody who had better links to Estonia. That was very important for me. I was perfectly aware that I have those two deficiencies: I don't speak Estonian at all (many husbands and wives of Estonians in Switzerland suffer from the same deficiency, so I noticed it is not only my challenge) and I had no connection to the Estonian community in Switzerland, but it changed immensely quickly.

The day before yesterday my son said: "You are going to an Estonian event?" I said: "Yes, I am." My son asked me if I could bring him some Estonian bread? I told him: "I don't think I can do it, it's catered from Switzerland." He looked at me and asked: "Then what's the point of going there..?".

That's the consequence of the charm that you have had and keep having, being so inclusive. When I could take my son with me to St John's Day, who was very shy there at the beginning and he noticed that Estonian children do not speak only Estonian. He had a blast there. He took off his shoes and kept them hidden and told me that "We can't leave, I don't know where my shoes are".

I feel very flattered that the Estonian community has adopted not just me, but my entire family. It is surprising how fast it was to get to know a lot of Estonians and to establish a good and continuous rapport.

How often do Estonians turn to you?

There are some quiet days and then there are days, when I receive more than 5 calls, and one emergency. It comes in different waves. That's from the administrative part.

And then there are some more focused events, where I am helping to raise the awareness of Estonia as a business community and help to connect Estonian and Swiss firms.

Do you have more positive or negative issues why you are being contacted?

I would say, apart from 2-3 more complicated approaches - none of them by Estonians, by the way - it is 99% absolutely positive. Sometimes people want answers about hotel closing hours (*me laughing*) or would like me to issue visas. Some people traveling to Estonia think that the Honorary Consulate knows what the Covid-Regulations will be four months from now...

But again, there has never been any Estonian person with those requests, rather other people.



Has the picture of an Estonian changed now after you have more contact with them?

What most of the people, who don't know Estonians, come up with, is the stereotype of shy, rather quiet, Nordic, Baltic people - that is not my experience and I noticed that when I was for the first time in Estonia. It takes a bit of time to get to know each other, but once you

meet with Estonian people, they are very cheerful. I knew of course that singing plays a fundamental role, also. So I would not say my view of Estonian people has changed, it has been rather very, very pleasantly intensified. I really appreciate the easy way or uncomplicated way of dealing with one another and working together for a good purpose.

What are the common things between Estonians and Swiss?

I would say that there is a common background in having proximity to nature. And to be caring and protective of the environment. Also being innovative, not only in IT matters, where Switzerland and Estonia are both leading. Moreover, what is quite amazing for me - we have had in Switzerland centuries of time to work on our democracy and improve it and fine-tune it and it turned out very well. When you look at Estonia - the newly independent Estonia - celebrating 30 years, I think what was achieved in 30 years is very impressive. I don't know if maybe the small size or smaller size of a country, like Estonia or Switzerland, as opposed to Germany, France or UK, helps. Because there is a bit more interaction and people tend to know each other better than in larger countries. If that helps to have better ways of sorting out problems. But I think there is this commonality of wanting to work for the common good, the *res publica*, as it is mentioned and to have reasonable care of it.

There are commonalities, where you have this responsibility for the common good, *res publica*, our city, our community, our society, our country and we want to make the best for it and out of it, together. This is an approach I like very much and this is something that inspires me very much - working together and not working against one another. That comes with all the challenges that all societies have, but I would say that this is a fundamental commonality that I see, a striking resemblance between Switzerland and Estonia. And it is fascinating for me to see that in Estonia there

is this young democracy and it is a model EU member state that has achieved so much.

When you come to the 30 years of Estonian Re-independence, which we were celebrating together on the 20th August, here in the Honorary Consulate rooms, my son asked me afterwards if we were in an art museum? Why and where does all this art come from?

The founder of the company I am the CEO of, president of the board, he is very fond of art, and so am I. Personally I have a slightly different preference more into the impressionist world and pop art, graphic art, lithographs and so on. But we share both the passion and love for art.

I grew up with art and paintings. So this is also one very nice way of having the office decorated in a nice way and secondly, also to support young talents or young artists. It is something that is very close to my heart. I have some ideas for the future, also focused towards Estonia - to do something with young artists and for young artists from Estonia. But that's a plan for next year(s).

As we are doing this interview for our Christmas newspaper, would you like to wish anything for Estonians living in Switzerland?

I wish all the Estonians living in Switzerland a wonderful, prosperous time! Hopefully everyone can meet with their relatives and friends freely. To meet here in Switzerland, or in Estonia, or wherever and that everyone can have a peaceful time with friends and family, relax, recharge the batteries, and to celebrate Christmas with loved ones and that the pandemic shall not be any hindrance for this season. *(edit. Let's keep the thumbs up!)*

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