

Josè Moskovits

Someone said to me: "Look, don't set your hopes too high. I'm sure Mr. Moskovits will like you, but if his wife does not, you can forget about it." This was supposed to be a pep talk for my job interview at the Moskovits office. The year was 1999; I had been a volunteer at the IWO since 1994, salvaging books and restoring archives, and thanks to that I was at the right place and time when someone came looking for a person with German language skills. Ever since that day I am convinced that good things will happen to you when you give something valuable to your community. Because - they did happen to me. I was lucky. Mrs. Moskovits liked me and I got the job.

My task during the first month was going through every file in the archive room, find the life story, put all the details into a copybook, and mark each file according to its suitability for an application to the forced labor program of the Claims Conference. No easy task. Every story a nightmare. I thought I already knew every detail of the Shoah, but then I had trouble sleeping, I got sick and for several days I strongly doubted I would be able to go on. But I pulled through, thanks mostly to the immense kindness of everyone around me, and first of all, the personality of our beloved boss whom we called *el señor* in Spanish and "**Herr Moskovits**" in German. He called us in an old-fashioned way "Frau Malke", "Frau Eva". His even temper, his generosity, his respect for the other, his sense of justice, his passion and, not least, his jokes kept everything together.

A day in the office of Moskovits early on would look like this: come in by 9 and find the boss already at his huge paper-strewn desk. "So, how are we today? Ready to get busy? But first, tell me something nice." Even if you haven't slept a wink for some obscure reason, this and his smile get you invariably into shape. He asks after your health and your family, he wants to know what you think of certain events in this country, in Europe or in America. And as soon as you have dropped your bag he is already calling you for dictation. Conversation takes place in German or Spanish, mostly in both languages in the same sentence, with a

sprinkling of Yiddish and Russian. Dictation is exclusively in German as most letters go to the lawyers in Germany who represent the clients before the courts. I sit on the opposite side of the desk, copybook and pencil ready. He dictates letter after letter and within half an hour or 45 minutes the files next to me grow into a sizeable heap. Then back to my desk, type it all up with 2 copies, and back for signing. This is 1999; there are only electrical typewriters and one cute little Mac model 1989 that "belongs" to Eva. Many times Mr. Moskovits does not like a certain word, or reconsiders whole paragraphs, so you have to type it all over again. He dictates to all 5 of us in the course of the morning and his timing for calling us in again for signing is perfect. He knows exactly how long it will take you to finish. Imagine, there was a time before ours when he dictated to 15 people...

Beside letters to the lawyers there are other tasks like translating medical reports and doctor's certificates from Spanish, Portuguese or English into German. Attending to clients' requests like reading them letters from German authorities, filling in forms, or applying for an upgrade of the indemnification pay.

At noon we all sit around the big table in the central room that seats up to 8 and eat food ordered from nearby restaurants. Lunch is always on the house. Sometimes clients drop by unexpectedly and they too are invited to sit down and order some food. On Fridays lunches are special: we gorge ourselves on Jewish food ordered from the deli Olam. Before we sit down, Mr. Moskovits signals to me: "Please Frau Malke, don't forget the important item!" I walk up to the kitchen and bring down the Vodka bottle from the freezer. Not everybody likes to partake in that special treat, but I always do. "After downing a Vodka, Frau Malke works better and faster", he used to say.

When he is in a buoyant mood – which is the case quite often in the early years – the noon break is filled with stories and anecdotes from "interesting times", an endless spring well of memories, and usually something we never heard before. "You have to write, please let's write it down", we plead with him. Today we are so glad we were at least able to convince him to do the interviews. It took a lot of convincing.

In the early afternoon regulars might turn up who try to sell Mr. Moskovits the things he loves and collects passionately: silver plate Judaica, antique holy books, Shoah items from the ghettos, stamps from the Nazi era, concentration camp correspondence. Everyone is treated with the same respect and courtesy, although they have to really ply their trade, because Mr. Moskovits is no easy

customer. They have to cool their heels or call again, and come back again and again, till a deal is struck. All this involves long conversations in Hungarian, Yiddish, Spanish, Hebrew, and German, with a smattering of English and Italian.

Clients who come for whatever reason are keen to enter the Holy of Holies (which involves stepping down one step) and sit and reminisce with their “best of friends”. Actually, they think they have a natural right to do so and are profoundly offended when circumstances don’t allow for the extra chat time. Everybody respects and loves our boss and he makes everybody feel special. Of course, some are more special than others. But this only his staff is allowed to know. In his brain lie dormant all the life stories of over 3000 clients. You name a name, a place, a year, and out pours the whole story with all the details, where they were born, in which ghetto they worked, in which concentration camps they survived, where they were liberated and when they came to Argentina. A truly prodigal memory which goes on the wane only in the last weeks of his life.

He was the most generous person I have met. The best of lunches for the staff on the house was a given. A week before Passover and New Year he would personally grab the phone and put in an order for 12 to 18 gift baskets with all the delicacies you can imagine and the best wine, liqueur and champagne. The day he presented us with our baskets we all needed a taxi to lug them home, they were that heavy. And it was the same for everyone; he made no difference between the office staff and the janitor.

When he asked us to stay overtime or come in on Saturdays he would pay generous extra fees. If on very rare occasions he was late by one single day in paying out our salaries he would apologize and offer some advance to tidy us over.

Then there were the *schnorrer* – the freeloaders and spongers, regulars who would draw money out of Mr. Moskovits for their causes, some good, some crazy. He would make them wait, then hear them out, sometimes make a promise for the following week. But in the end he always gave. There were those who had fallen on hard times unexpectedly – it happened quite often in the post default years following 2001 – or someone who had just been knocking his door for years for a mere handout. He always gave. Nobody left empty-handed. His pocket was as big as his heart.

There were several boxes and files, some slim, some fat, that Mr. Moskovits was secretly proud of. They carried the names of the likes of Eichmann, Mengele,

Schwammlinger and others. And there was a big box of correspondence with Simon Wiesenthal. He talked about it often and told anecdotes without naming names. Apparently he had been instrumental in providing information that led to the capture of these Nazi criminals. As much as we tried to make him open up on the subject during his last years, he never told us what really had happened in each case.

As you can see, this office was a world apart. Not only did its subject matter make it special; the human factor made it unique, the people that were thrown together around this extraordinary man by sheer coincidence to perform tasks that helped further justice for those who had suffered the unspeakable. We were no mere colleagues, we were friends, some for life. I am immensely grateful I could be part of this microcosm for 15 years. They were the best years of my life.

Melanie Schumieder

Buenos Aires, 14.03.2016

When I first came to Mr. Moskovits' office the situation was really an unusual one:

I saw him sitting in front of his huge desk in the main office and in one of several office cubicles, an elderly lady, Mrs Rendelstein, one of his secretaries, told me that as a test I had to take a dictation in German, because "*Mr. Moskovits usually dictates 25 letters a day*". She wanted to see how quickly I was able to write. That was my first desperate moment on the day I started. Of course, there never were 25 letters a day, but the exam was successful in the end and I was immediately accepted.

The second desperate moment that day came when Mr. Moskovits invited me to come in and write the first letter to one of the two lawyers in Germany he was working with. He talked to me very jovially, always smiling, never urgent or pressing, but the technical words he used were so new to me, that I couldn't understand a word and I virtually was trembling.

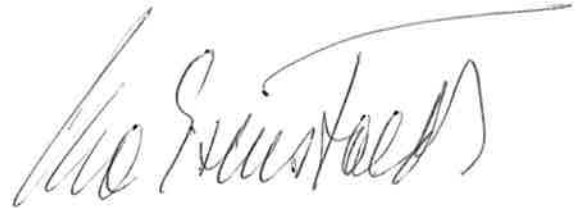
You have to imagine, at that moment in 1995 we didn't have computers. We had to type on electric typewriters (also new to me!) and when a word was wrong, it was a big hassle to correct the copies and the original. We used to make two copies with each letter.

But...we learned and got used to everything, because Mr. Moskovits was such a special person, he was even-tempered and mostly cheerful. He always was kind to us all, not only to his immediate staff but to everyone down to the delivery boy. Working with him was a pleasure. It's important to mention that Halina his lovely wife was always his support. She read all the resolutions which came from Germany and was the one who spoke sometimes very loud... at the court.

When someone rang the doorbell at noon when we were having lunch, he asked the person to come in and join the table. Be it a client or someone who wanted to sell him something he was passionate about (silver plate judaica, antique books), he was urged to sit down and have a bite. We all had lunch together, at the beginning in a small restaurant around the corner. Later on, a maid or the janitor's wife came in to cook. Sometimes we were 7 or 9 around the table.

Often he asked us into his office, Malke and me, to discuss personal problems or some new procedure like applications for social security pay for ghetto workers or widows' pensions. We had to find out by ourselves how to fill in the forms, because he didn't like to teach us how to do it.

His big passion during the last years was organizing the anniversary of the allied victory over Nazi Germany. We had to look up government officials of several ministries (and the president!), ambassadors and consular attachés of the former allied countries and all European countries (and China, too!), send out written invitations months ahead and follow them up with calls, organize the speakers and music for the event, rent a theatre which he paid for out of his own pocket, because what he wanted in life was that the Shoah be never forgotten, that was his only purpose in life.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Eva', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

EVA