



***Astrid Pregel  
Head of Mission –  
Canada's Consul General /  
Southeastern USA***

### ***A Bohemian Turned Career Diplomat***

As impressive as her credentials are, what makes Astrid Pregel truly extraordinary are her authenticity, independent thinking, multicultural heritage, and her wonderful wit. How she came to be the person that she is a most intriguing story.

But first, a short version of Astrid's professional biography reveals that she heads a team of 40 Canadians and Americans who work in the Canadian Consulate General offices in Atlanta and Miami. Her responsibilities include all of Canada's relations with the seven southeastern states, a region whose GDP is larger than all but five industrial nations.

During her twenty four years in foreign service, she has been posted in Africa, India, Canada and the US, and has also worked with the Republic of Korea. In the early 90's, Astrid was the Director of Trade Information Systems at the Department of External Affairs and International Trade in Ottawa. While there, she led the development of specialized software essential to the success of Canada's diplomatic commercial teams around the world. Currently, her primary area of engagement continues to be commercial and industrial development. This role involves helping Canadians improve their business relationships with US-based companies in the southeastern states and vice versa. It also means that Astrid must maintain a high profile in Atlanta and other communities she serves. Hosting numerous receptions and diplomatic dinners each year is just one of her duties.

#### ***European influences and values***

A "maple leaf" Canadian through and through, Astrid was actually born in Holland. Her father was an engineer. While he focused on his work which often required travel for career advancement, Astrid's mother was the traditional stay-at-home mom focusing all of her time and energy on raising three girls. "There weren't any boys," Astrid said, "so it was all about girls in our house."

When Astrid was four, her parents announced that she and her two younger sisters would be getting a new home and a new country. Canada became their adopted country and Toronto their home.

Some of Astrid's fondest memories growing up in Toronto are of her family's summer camping trips. "We would spend weeks at a time in the bush - fishing, kayaking, and just being very active. This is how I developed my physical strength, as well as my independence," Astrid explained. "I felt very free during those summers. I liked that feeling."

But not everything was about being free and having fun. High standards, particularly where academics were concerned, were one of the European values that her parents instilled in Astrid and her sisters. "It was never a question of not going to university," she said, "just where I would go. I had always been above average in everything, but I really loved PE. Maybe it was because both my parents were athletes, and my mother had wanted to pursue a career in physical education herself."

### *New directions*

Whatever the reason, Astrid did in fact pursue an undergraduate degree in Physical Education and graduated with honor. She decided to put her degree to work in the YWCA. Among other activities, she taught aerobic classes and organized community outreach programs. It was perhaps the latter involvement that persuaded Astrid that she was less interested in teaching than in pursuing higher education. While she didn't know the direction her life would ultimately take, she knew she spoke four languages (French, Dutch, English, and German) and she thought that business might be a good place to start.

Accepted at York University in Toronto, Astrid began a new journey toward an MBA degree. It was 1976 and the separatist movement was heating up in Quebec. Astrid participated in an exchange program with the University of Laval in Quebec City that included a file clerk position in a government office. There she increased her fluency in French and was stimulated by the debate going on around her.

"I found living in Quebec at that time to be very intellectually stimulating - as well as the whole MBA experience," Astrid said. "Interestingly, 35% of the MBA students in Quebec were women, while at other universities in Canada, the percentage was much lower."

Another milestone in her life happened while Astrid was in Quebec. By happenstance, she met a man who was preparing to take the foreign service exam. "What's that?" Astrid asked, not having a clue what was involved. Nevertheless, the man had an extra exam form, and Astrid took it. Nothing happened right away.

In the meantime, Astrid was literally bombarded with as many as 16 job offers, from global corporations as well as Canada's five largest banks. She was also involved in another momentous event that would change her life forever. She met her future husband. He was from Algeria.

Taking time to decide her future, Astrid said "No" to the banks and corporations. Being true to herself, especially her strong sense of independence, she knew she didn't aspire to

be a “corporate clone” – i.e., to fit the desired profile that those types of positions would have required. Instead she decided to take the foreign service exam again. This time there were 5000 who took it, and only 5 people were accepted into the commercial economic stream. Astrid was one of them. This was incredible, since there were only 8 or 9 women in the entire system at that time. In commercial development, less than 5% of her colleagues were women.

### *Life in foreign service*

How well would Astrid progress in this mostly man’s world? Well, the answer to that question is a given, but it certainly wasn’t a cake walk. Her first assignment was in Nairobi, Kenya. She was originally to be posted in Senegal but was changed to Nairobi when her husband landed a job there. At 27 years old, Astrid was a new wife and step-mother to two daughters and responsible for 10 east African countries. By anyone’s standards, this was an enormous responsibility to manage. On the professional side, she was representing Canada’s interests in all of these countries with many diverse people and issues. On the personal side, she had a ready-made family for which to care. No doubt, her ability to multitask served Astrid well.

While on assignment in Africa, Astrid also spent time with her husband’s family in Algeria, a country with a strong French culture. “I was actually rather shaken by what I learned there about women’s view of themselves and what they could, or could not, do. They had a defeatist attitude. I would not have liked living in that environment.”

After three years in Africa, Astrid was reassigned back to Ottawa. By this time, her family had gained another daughter, Astrid’s first as the birth mother. “This was a very interesting time. I had lived there before - a rather Bohemian lifestyle - and now I was returning as a married woman with kids, looking for a four bedroom house in the burbs! Quite a different perspective.”

“I learned quickly that I had to have help. Fortunately, I found good household help and help with the girls. Of course, the help earned more than I did in those days. Daycare in Canada has improved a great deal since then, however, and some of my colleagues even manage without help at home.”

(Note: The US could learn from Canada in this important area!)

Later, Astrid and her husband would add a fourth daughter to their growing family. Together, this family of six would experience an incredible range of lifestyles and cultures as Astrid’s career in Canada’s foreign service continued. In most cases, her husband was able to follow her in her assignments and find meaningful work of his own in the same location. While it didn’t always work out exactly that way, they managed...and by all accounts, did a good job of parenting.

### *Fruits of her labor and future perspective*

Leapfrogging to the present, the four “girls” are now 35, 30, 20 and 13. All seem to be doing very well – no doubt influenced in many positive ways by their unique upbringing

and their strong and successful mother. The youngest, Maya, lives with Astrid in Atlanta and is a budding writer. She's also a developing next generation leader.

In the spring of 2003, Astrid hosted a one day conference in Atlanta that brought hundreds of women together from all across the city, state, country, and in fact, the world to celebrate International Women's Day. One of the keynote speakers was Kim Campbell, the former prime minister of Canada and the current chairman of The Council of Women World Leaders. Another highly respected speaker was Dr. Johnnetta Cole, formerly President of Spelman College, now President of Bennett College. It was Astrid's 13 year-old daughter who went to the podium and confidently and articulately introduced Dr. Cole with a tribute she wrote herself. There was a rousing wave of applause, as much for Maya as for the speaker. To continue her education, Maya will be returning to Toronto in the fall. Being the proud and supportive mother that she is, Astrid knows that this one's special, just like her other daughters, and she wants what's best for her, even if that means a temporary separation.

As for Astrid, posted in Atlanta since 2000, continuing Canada's work in the seven southeastern states will definitely keep her busy and challenged. She has just moved into a new home that's even more inviting for guests and special events. As for the future, one can only speculate on what opportunities and adventures lie ahead for this intelligent, independent, and ebullient leader.

To the many people she has impacted so positively, Astrid is a true SHero, especially to other professional women and next generation leaders. In a "man's world," she has clearly demonstrated that women rise to the occasion and can go beyond their own dreams and expectations. Whatever may be next on her life's agenda, you can be assured that Astrid will make a BIG difference – and, she'll be having fun in the process

Interview Completed April 2003

By Susan B. Hitchcock

VP – Client Services & Executive Director, Women's Initiatives

Creator of research project - The Age of SHeroes