

## My career and life changing ASEM DUO experience by Maciej Lachowicz

It's Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> of June 2013, a nice morning and I have just woken up to get ready to go to the University. In 2 weeks, I have my Bachelor Thesis defense scheduled. The emotions are tense due to last exams that I am taking, but that Thursday brought something that made those feelings of uncertainty and fear go away. I got mail. An e-mail, from ASEM-DUO letting me know that I am going to study in the Republic of Korea for a semester!

To give you the sense how exotic Korea was to me, I knew it for hosting 2002 FIFA World Cup with unfortunate match: Korea against Poland in Busan that Poland lost 4-0 and some random people on the street Seoul also mentioned to me as something that they know about Poland. The Capital? Sure, that's easy, Korean War – had to know a bit since my father and brother are both history geeks. Obviously also knew Samsung, LG or Daewoo, but most definitely it would be fair to say I didn't know that much.

The initial excitement and curiosity got quite quickly accompanied with fear of unknown and that I might have agreed to more than I can handle, but the greatest remedy for that feeling was a conversation with my father. He did travel a lot in times that traveling from Poland wasn't that easy, he supported me and made me feel that the decision I've made was a right one.

What also might give an explanation to why Korea is usually an exotic place for a Polish person is that when I went to Warsaw to pay a visit to the Korean embassy in order to get a visa, I went to the gate and security guard told me: "The Japanese embassy is the next building, what are you looking for?". And when I replied that I am actually here to apply for Korean visa he was quite in shock.

Next step is me leaving my parents' house in Toruń, a beautiful city in the center of Poland to go to the Chopin Airport in Warsaw and start my Korean adventure. It was a car ride to Warsaw, a flight to Dubai and the second flight to Incheon International Airport, then a train ride to Seoul, another train ride in KTX to Daegu and there was my buddy waiting for me to take me to my assigned dormitory at Kyungpook National University Campus. We took a cab, he helped to check in in the dormitory and I could finally rest. The trip from closing the door in Toruń to opening one to my room in Daegu took 36 hours! I don't believe I have ever been that tired! I have arrived very late in the evening, so I just went to take a shower and then straight to sleep. During the night the air conditioning broke in the dormitory so the temperature in the room was the same as outside, over 30 degrees Celsius, I woken up in the middle of the night being sure that I have been sent to hell! I remember exactly how I felt that very moment. I was extremely tired and hot in a totally new place eight thousand kilometers from home, surrounded by the people that I do not know in a country that language at this moment was for me like a sophisticated cipher. I wanted to cry out of the feeling of hopelessness thinking that I might fail before I have even started my exchange.

I know that this might sound like a cliché or a script from almost any movie, but all that bad feeling went away the first day that I had a chance to meet my roommates, and other students coming to KNU for their exchange programs. What I didn't realize in the first moment of doubt is that others

coming to Korea from all over the world are in the exact same position as me, and if we are in this together then what's there to stop us? To this day I am in close contact with my dormitory friends Kuba, Paweł and Piotr who I met in Korea.

We have immediately started to get to know the Campus and Daegu itself, getting to know each other at the same time. One of my biggest takeaways from this semester in Korea is all the knowledge I was able to gain directly from informal ambassadors of Korea, Japan, USA, UK, Finland, Russia, Estonia, Lithuania and many others. Why stick to stereotypes if you can get to know many points of view at the same subject. You got to stay open minded and just try to absorb as much as you can if you are as like as we were at the time. Believe me or not but what we have done was almost a United Nations assembly in Daegu 2013. The amount of knowledge was mind blowing and it had a tremendous value, because this is something you cannot learn from even the greatest book.

Since we already are on the subject of learning, the transition to Korean system was fascinating! The setup with midterms and finals during one semester is different to what I was used to attending my university back in Poland. Also, the way in which professors were conducting classes seemed more engaging to me and I really responded well to that finishing my semester with straight A and A+ grades. Some of the classes I took like Understanding Korean Workplace or Korean Language were obviously totally new to me, and I really did my best to learn as much as possible.

In one of the classes I was the only not Korean student and immediately I became an expert on the outsider's perception of Korea and validator of some of Korean views of Europe. In this class I asked my professor if it would be possible to lead one class at 11<sup>th</sup> of November (which is the Independence Day in Poland) talking about Poland and Polish heritage. She agreed and I must say that this lecture was a moment that I lost my fear of public speaking. I was there speaking to around 30 students who knew me by that time but didn't know that much about my country. I was speaking in English covered in Polish flag, answering questions on Poland and I felt proud. Both of me being a promoter of Poland and the fact that I can stand here for over an hour and speak freely. This also is incredibly useful in my career.

When it comes to Korean language, I can only say I can read the alphabet, I think I could still introduce myself and order some food at the restaurant and maybe do the grocery shopping. I've put my Korean in my language skills in my résumé and I find it as a great icebreaker for the interviews! But beware, almost every recruiter or manger has asked me to say something in Korean so don't put Korean in yours unless you can say at least one sentence!

But the learning, also this that as I realized later was career and life changing for me was happening outside the classroom. My newly met friends and neighbors at my dormitory floor were majoring in Computer Science, and computers were my passion but my not the greatest math's skills held me back from also pursuing an IT degree. What then came to my mind was to become a link between the technical world of IT professionals and the world of business that was my major back home and at KNU. I engaged in many discussions and even helped with developing a mention-controlled game that one of my friends was doing as a project. That was the moment when I saw that my point of view can be eye opening for a code focused individual. The worst part was that I have realized that, but in order to get a job in this field I would have to convince someone that my perception of that is true. So far, my experience with working within IT was related to being an ICT volunteer during UEFA EURO 2012 Poland and Ukraine. I was then working as an onsite

IT support at the stadium in Gdańsk. It didn't put me in the best position to apply for the position of business language to IT translator, but we will get back to this later.

When I came back to Poland, I was so eager to keep my results and take as much as I can from the time I have left before getting my master's degree that I was on a full scholarship till the very end of academic chapter of my life. Thanks to my exchange and results achieved both at KNU and UG I was awarded with an Internship in the USA – a new program introduced by my alma mater in cooperation with University of Houston Downtown, that awarded 10 best students from the whole University. In Houston I worked at Houston Food Bank – the largest food bank in the USA and I was asked if I would like to join the IT department since I've put my previous volunteering experience in my resume. This is another step in the direction that I took towards the IT career.

After I defended my master's thesis in economics, by the way also connected to the IT world (my master's thesis title was "The Witcher game series marketing strategy", there was a time to look for a first serious job. Looking thru the job ads one stood out, there was an option to get into the "big 4" by joining PwC that was launching a Financial Crime Unit in Gdańsk. They were looking for economics, law and few other areas graduates. I decided to apply and after few stages of interviews, I was in! In the feedback after my interview, I heard that the director was impressed with my exchange in Korea and internship in the USA, so the first career opportunity was achieved partly thanks to my exchange participation! This was a huge success for me, still away from my ultimate goal but as I mentioned before not only my career was about to change. While working at PwC I met the most amazing woman I've ever seen: Paulina who is now my wife and mother to my beautiful son Michał. I thought it was as good as it gets once we started to be together, but soon my friend previously working together with me at PwC reached out to me asking: "would you like to change job and join me in Nordea Bank? I know you are interested in IT and there is a position open.". It didn't take me much time to apply, as it seemed I could be one step closer to my desired job. Once again, I was lucky enough to get an offer that I have accepted and now I officially am a part of the IT department of Nordea! I have joined as an IT process specialist working in the field of identity and access management. So, I am in IT and now just need to prove myself to be worthy of becoming a link between programmers and bankers. After some time when the organization grew and was looking for a scrum master for a software development team. I saw the opportunity and when my manger asked me if I feel that I can handle the role I have told him about my experience back in Korea. He decided to give it a go. Half year later I was a product owner organizing and prioritizing development of IAM solutions. This area of work, being in center of interest for various stakeholders and development team at the same time continues even though I have changed companies twice. Everywhere I am seen as an expert in the area and a good asset because of my capability to communicate and cooperate. Right now, I am working with projects and audits within the Identity and Access Management are in international company from medical sector. I am valued for my professionalism, the knowledge I gained and the attitude I shown to become the part of the cybersecurity world. I am still the first person to reach whenever someone with good soft skills and multi-cultural experience is required to step in. I am really happy with my career so far, and I think I am getting ready to take next step to become a leader in my area.

To not take too much of your time please let me summarize. I believe the chance I was given by ASEM-DUO changed my life. And frankly speaking it changed it drastically and I couldn't be happier. Both my career and personal life are the outcome of a puzzle that my exchange in Korea was a huge piece. In Korea I met my best friend, thanks to the exchange I got a job where I met my wife. Thanks to my interest in IT and experience got outside of classrooms in Korea I got my first job in real IT. I am extremely grateful to ASEM-DUO for giving me this opportunity 10 years ago, and for this opportunity to share my story with you today. I think if anyone is ever given a chance as I was given, this person should take it and I can guarantee no regrets. I will end my essay by saying: ASEM-DUO changed my life! It changed my life for so much better than it was!

Thank you,

Maciej Lachowicz