

A long-term journey

After 17 years in the position of AmCham's Executive Director, Jake Slegers will have the opportunity to enjoy some rest and look for new challenges. Under his guidance, AmCham has expanded its activities, its membership base and earned the position of a respectable voice of the business community. Seventeen years can't be summarized in three pages but this brief interview at least recounts Jake's beginnings in Slovakia and in AmCham, as well as some of the most important developments in AmCham's history.



JAKE SLEGERS
Executive Director,
AmCham Slovakia
(2001 - 2018)

BIOGRAPHY

How did you end up in Slovakia? Was it a coincidence or did you choose this country for a specific reason?

I was looking for an opportunity to live abroad somewhere for a year and discovered that teaching English was a good possibility. I did some research at the University of Minnesota and I started focusing on Central and Eastern Europe. I was informed about a school in Bratislava, Slovakia, that hosted a number of Americans as teachers. Eventually I was put in contact with them and went to Chicago for an interview. And a few months later I was on a plane to Slovakia.

You mentioned it was supposed to be for a year. Did you have any idea when you arrived that it would turn out to be a long-term affair?

As I have said many times in the past when answering similar questions, if somebody had told me when I was boarding the plane in August of 1994, "You're going to be there for over 23 years", I don't think I would have gotten on the plane. I had absolutely no intention of staying longer than one year.

I recently related that story to a Slovak guy who responded with, "Well, that kind of reminds me of the Warsaw Pact invasion of 1968. That was supposed to be temporary as well!" I found the comparison extremely funny, to say the least. Hopefully I have had a more positive influence.

Do you still remember your first impressions upon arriving in Slovakia in 1994?

I arrived by bus from Prague to the "beautiful" Bratislava bus station which hasn't changed much until the complete reconstruction was started last year. My first impressions were that things needed renovation and some improving which thankfully did happen in the next few years. I remember that everything seemed a little bit run down and neglected.

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Was it difficult to get by for an American?

There was quite a significant language barrier for me. At

that time there were not so many people here who spoke English. So, I did the best I could by being perceptive to tone of voice and gestures and facial expressions. But I was so open to that challenge, and I was looking for something completely different, that I rather somehow perversely enjoyed it. After a few years here, I was able to communicate at least somewhat. It's a challenging language!

And, yes, it was a completely different world for me in so many ways. But like I said, I came here with a completely open approach and was seeking adventure and life experience. So, I think that made it less difficult.

When did you decide to prolong your stay and why?

It took many years for me to finally internalize that I might be here for the long-term. After I've been here for three or four years I remember when a friend introduced me as a friend from Slovakia. At that time, I still didn't consider myself living in Slovakia.

After my first year teaching I decided I didn't have a full experience. That first year was full of drama and turmoil and I knew that if I left after one year it would be just a little blip on the screen of my life experience. I wanted a more full experience so I decided to stay one more year and I taught at a different school. At the end of two years I very nearly left. I had everything

Jake Slegers was born and raised near Tyler, Minnesota. After attending Normandale Community College and Augsburg College in Minneapolis, he went to Slovakia in August 1994 after previously working briefly for General Mills, a Minneapolis-based cereal and snack food production company. The purpose of his venture to Slovakia was to teach English at local high schools, which he did for two years. He was then employed at Radio Slovakia International as a business reporter, journalist and broadcaster for over three years.

In March 1999, Jake became Deputy Director of the American Chamber of Commerce in the Slovak Republic. During that time he focused on membership expansion, event planning and other duties. He also was employed on an ad-hoc basis by the OSCE and the US State Department as an International Election Observer in various countries, including Bosnia-Herzegovina, Ukraine, Tajikistan, and Macedonia. Jake became Executive Director of AmCham Slovakia in January 2001 and served in this capacity until May 2018, overseeing all operations of the chamber. He also served two terms as Chairman of AmChams in Europe, the umbrella organization uniting all AmChams operating in Europe, from 2012 through 2015, and was on the Executive Committee for several years previously. In November 2014, Jake was awarded the official Medal of the President of the Slovak Republic by Slovak President Andrej Kiska in recognition of his long-term contributions to the development of Slovak-American economic relations and his efforts in presenting Slovakia abroad.



packed up to leave. I had an interview with Slovak Radio International and right before I left for the summer I found out that I had the position.

Over the summer, I decided to come back since this was a unique opportunity to work in the media of a foreign country. So I did come back. I really enjoyed that job and that's how I cut my teeth on Slovakia and got to know so many people in business and politics who were or still are in prominent positions today. I had to read forty or fifty news items every day so I also got to know Slovakia, and its business and political environment, very well.

It was this experience with Slovak Radio International, where I was covering business, which prepared me for consideration for the American Chamber of Commerce. But it was even after I was with the Chamber for about two years that I came to the realization that this was going to be a long-term thing.

Is it possible to compare AmCham today with AmCham back in 2000?

It's vastly different of course. We were at the top floor of the Hotel Danube. I think we started out with three small rooms which weren't even all connected and we had to go through the hallway to get from one to the other. We eventually had a doorway sawed in the thick concrete wall to create a between the two rooms. There were only two or three other people on staff when I came on. When I started as Deputy Director we had 117 members and everything was done on a much smaller scale. Today, AmCham has many more events, and therefore member services, as well as a much greater focus on the advocacy it provides for members.

What were the biggest challenges you had to face during your 17-year tenure in the position of the Executive Director?

Anytime you have a fairly public position you have to deal with a great variety of personalities. In our membership, on our Board of Directors, on staff, I've had the opportunity to work with some fantastic people who I greatly admire. There are also people in this world who, by nature, are a bit difficult. So, dealing with a great variety of personalities has had its challenges, but also has been enjoyable as well.

It took many years for me to finally internalize that I might be here for the long-term. After I've been here for three or four years I remember when a friend introduced me as a friend from Slovakia. At that time, I still didn't consider myself living in Slovakia.

Probably the biggest challenge I had to face was guiding the Chamber through the financial crisis which began in 2008. As indicators pointed to a decline in membership, in one fell swoop one day we were put on four-day weeks, 20% pay cuts, bonuses taken out of the budget, significant cuts in costs. Having to deal with all of that and trying to retain staff motivation and operate the chamber was a huge challenge. Seeing our numbers in 2009, 2010 and 2011 slowly decrease each year in terms of members and therefore revenues was discouraging. But through a

particular program, the Business Improvement Project, that we implemented by 2012, we eventually saw significant recovery. And today, in terms of membership and revenues, AmCham has exceeded the 2008 levels.

Despite the challenges of that time, at the end of 2017, we had a record number of members and a 96% satisfaction level in our Membership Survey.

Today, AmCham is widely recognized as the most respected chamber of commerce. Did it have a better starting position than the other chambers of commerce in Slovakia?

When I came on to the Chamber we were on a very similar level to many of the other foreign chambers here in Slovakia. After being in the position for some time I realized that we were probably not up to our full potential. In cooperation with the dedicated staff at the time, we slowly began to increase the number of activities we were doing. It took a full year or more for the feedback to begin to come back to us. All of a sudden we began to hear over and over again "Wow, AmCham is really starting to be active".

We also started to offer more membership services. I researched what other AmChams throughout Europe offered and how we could increase our services. We introduced the Patron membership level with increased benefits, which in turn lead to increased revenues, which allowed us to have more events, further expand our activities and hire more staff. We didn't even have a full-time person on advocacy at the beginning. Over time we were able to slowly expand our operations. One of the most important developments in the past few years is that we have, thanks to increased revenues, been able to significantly increase our resources for advocacy and policy initiatives.

Another important factor, and one that I personally focused on, was the fact that our services and advocacy levels were attractive for not only American and Slovak businesses, but also many other, mostly European, companies as well.

Looking back, what are the milestones that you consider as the biggest accomplishments that helped put AmCham in the position where it finds itself today?

The initial expansion of activities





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that I mentioned earlier had a significant impact. Relatively early on in my tenure, we opened the office in Košice, which was hugely challenging. Just to find appropriate office space — I was literally walking down the street looking for signs for rent in the windows. The grand opening was fantastic; it was a really memorable experience and a huge step for AmCham because we were able to offer many more services for our members in the Kosice region as well as expand our membership base there.

The move from the office in Hotel Danube to Crowne Plaza in 2006 was an important milestone as well. It took a couple of years before we finally found the right office space. When we first looked at our current office space it was in horrible condition and it was hard to imagine that we could be here.

I also think that the many conferences and cutting-edge events we had, such as the Political Party speaker Series, held usually in advance of the Slovak elections, really put us on the map.

I would also include The Rule of Law initiative. Seeing the growth from just personal discussions with a couple of staff members

to us putting it on paper, proposing it to the Board and then seeing the coalition form... All the efforts resulted in the incorporation of this initiative into the program of the Slovak government, which was really gratifying.

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... finding a healthy balance between the great variety of needs and interests of the membership, the expectations of the Board, and the requirements of the staff is critical. Also, the relationships with AmCham members are extremely important.

Also the Business Service Center Forum and where that is today.



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It also started out as a very small idea, as an internal discussion with a member company. We were considering whether to take it into AmCham or whether they would form their own organization. To see the success and the progress it has made is also very rewarding.

On a personal level I would mention that because of AmCham I was able to be involved in the AmCham's in Europe organization and served as President of that organization for four years.

As far as experiences are concerned, I'll never forget the day that I received the Medal of the Slovak President from President Kiska. I really felt that was a validation of the position of the Chamber after all those years.

I would also count among our accomplishments the development we have seen in AmCham's traditional flagship events — the Thanksgiving Gala Charity Dinner as well as the Independence Day celebration. Especially the most memorable Independence Day celebrations which took place at the Bratislava castle between 2004 and 2008, with over a thousand people attending, a parade, a hot-air balloon and all sorts of entertainment. Logistically, it was far more complicated than any event that we do today.

And I cannot leave out the very memorable 20th Anniversary celebration in the Bratislava Castle. The AmCham membership greatly appreciated that fact that their organization had such an event at the castle.

Do you have any advice for the incoming Executive Director?
There are many areas that I have already covered with Ronald, and intend to keep providing that input as I am asked, but I guess I would sum it up in the fact that finding a healthy balance between the

great variety of needs and interests of the membership, the expectations of the Board, and the requirements of the staff is critical. Also, the relationships with AmCham members are extremely important.

What is next for Jake Slegers?

Of most immediate importance is catching up on several things that I have put off for the last ten to fifteen years. Most of these have to do with my private and family issues.

I am considering several different options, some of the quite exciting. I've had some offers. But I have decided that as the vast majority of people I have talked to have encouraged me to take some time off. So for the time being I will focus on the personal projects I have neglected and, although I already have some other interesting options, I am trying very hard not to jump into that too quickly and to give myself a break.

It's been a great 18 years with AmCham Slovakia. I want to thank all the entities involved — the Board, the staff, and most of all the members of the chamber — for the great opportunity and allowing me to have this experience! It has indeed been a great pleasure.

Jake Slegers can be reached at jake@slegers.sk. His number remains the same.



1. Independence Day Celebration at the Bratislava Castle, June 1999.
2. The grand opening of AmCham's new premises at Hotel Crowne Plaza, 2007.
3. AmCham's 20th Anniversary Celebration at the Bratislava Castle, October 2014. Jake Slegers with Beverly Douglas, Founder & First Executive Director of AmCham Slovakia
4. Jake Slegers receiving The Medal of the President of Slovakia from President Andrej Kiska, 2014.