

Highflyer lands close to home

Customer service pays off for former flight attendant

BY JANA BAUEROVA
FOR THE POST

Though she works long hours, she looks 10 years younger than her real age and smiles constantly. Her V.I.P Homes real estate office' in a two-story house on a quiet street in Prague 5, is decorated with English-style furniture.

Not a typical Czech woman, Maria Mihinová is an admittedly happy workaholic, frequently working 12-hour days and most weekends.

Although she was born in what is now Slovakia, Mihinová has lived most of her life in this country. She studied tourism in a college in Karlovy Vary (Carlsbad) and after her graduation spent a year and a half in England. Following the events of 1968, Mihinová decided to go back to Czechoslovakia.

"Not many people returned back home, so I was looked upon as suspicious. I could not find a job for a long time," says Mihinová. But eventually she did find one: Czechoslovak Airlines (ČSA) was looking for flight attendants and she was hired.

"This was a very good job because even though ordinary people could not travel, I saw the whole world," she says.

Unfortunately, ČSA set a retirement age limit of 40 and she was forced to leave the job after nearly 20 years. Eventually, she started working for a travel agency that took care of "V.I.P." tourists.

While working there she met an American-Slovak who had a special request. He was not interested in historical monuments, but in houses and living here. He asked if she could find an apartment for him and explained how the real estate business worked in the United States. And thus V.I.P. Homes was born.

"I understood it was a very well paid job which a lot of American women do. It seemed like a right start to a new life," says Mihinová.

The Slovak entrepreneur started with nothing in 1990, and thanks to long hours, excellent customer service and her strong will, the list of V.I.P. Homes' clients grew. Today she has five employees and her client list includes names like Tel Source, Peugeot, Deloitte Touche and Credit Lyonnais.

Her firm deals primarily with renting luxury apartments or residential houses in the center or elite neighborhoods like Hradčanská because many of her clients are foreigners with children.

V.I.P. Homes' approach to customers is very much influenced by her work in the airlines: fulfilling the customer's needs, says Mihinová, who speaks German and English.

MARIA MIHINOVÁ

Job: owner, director of V.I.P. Homes

Age: 52

Hobbies: traveling, yoga, gardening, reading

Marital status: divorced

Born: Dvorníky nad Váhom, Slovakia

"We try to provide maximum comfort to our clients, we pick them up at the airport, drive them around, give them overall information about living in Prague."

There's only one thing she says she has a hard time with: she can't stand losing. "Real estate is like waves, sometimes things do not work out the way you want them to. My mistake is that I view this as my personal failure," says the 52-year-old businesswoman.

Mihinová got divorced after setting up the agency, and admits that it was work and no time for her family that killed her marriage. She says it is difficult to fit in time for regular yoga practice on a quick meeting with her 23-year-old son. But if her work pace grows unbearable, she has a solution.

I still do have the advantage of free flights so every time I'm tired from real estate; I jump on an air-plane and travel to the opposite side of the world. Or at least to Paris for a weekend," Mihinová says with a laugh.