

From the Edges of the World

As DFAIT connects Canadians to the world, it draws on the rich tapestry of skills and experience of its employees, especially those born outside of our borders. Here are a few of their stories.

Today, Zoulfia Chougaiпова works as a program officer in the Biological Non-Proliferation Division of the Global Partnership Program Bureau. She has a fulfilling job and a sense that the earth is firm beneath her feet. But in the early 1990s, she and her parents were strangers to any sense of security.

The Chougaiповs are Tatars, part of an ancient ethnic group sprinkled throughout Russia and the Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union. In the early 1990s, they were living in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, where Zoulfia attended high school and began university. Then civil war broke out. There was gunfire and explosions in the streets, and some of her classmates lost their parents in the fighting.

“There was no longer any safety for people in Dushanbe,” she recalls. “All we wanted to do was to get away from the civil war and ethnic conflict.”

The family fled to Samara, Russia, where Zoulfia completed university and worked for the Soros Foundation’s Open Society Institute, which was promoting the development of civil society in Russia. In 1996, she came to Canada and completed a master’s degree in public policy and public administration at Concordia University. After graduation, she worked for two government departments and as State Visits Researcher for the Governor General before joining DFAIT in 2008.

“Doors are always open to me, and I have an interesting career path in the Canadian public service. I love Canada for its richness of linguistic, cultural and human experience, and am proud to be Canadian.”

Arcade Kakunze, who manages the Enquiries Service, hails from Burundi, a central African country that, like its neighbour Rwanda, was torn apart by ethnic strife in the mid-1990s. Arcade was living at that time in Washington, D.C., where his father was a diplomat. When his father was recalled to Burundi, he opted not to go back, knowing that the political environment was dangerous for returning diplomats and politicians. Instead, the

family immigrated to Canada—to London, Ontario, where his father became an elementary school teacher.

After completing a communications degree at the University of Ottawa, Arcade applied for a position as an agent in the Enquiries Service and became manager three years later.

Arcade has been back to Burundi twice since moving to Canada—first 10 years ago, and again last year, when his relatives were delighted to note a great improvement in his Kirundi, the national language.

“I have not forgotten my beginnings, and I’m delighted to see the country quite stable now—but I feel very Canadian,” Arcade says. He laughs. “I even say eh.”

Estelle Chou works as a policy and licensing officer in the Remote Sensing Space Systems Division, which licenses earth observation satellites. That’s half a world and a lifetime away from her childhood in Taiwan. Her grandmother was famous there—a congresswoman in Chiang Kai Shek’s last government in China, who fled to Taiwan the day before the People’s Liberation Army raided her Shanghai home.

When she was 14, Estelle came to Toronto. It was hard going at first, since she spoke no English, but she soon aced her ESL classes and then enrolled at the University of Toronto, where she earned a master’s degree in contemporary Chinese politics while working for CSIS. Three years ago, she joined DFAIT.

Estelle has since worked briefly in the Canadian embassy in Beijing, where, understandably, her fluency in both Mandarin and Cantonese was an asset. “It was interesting work at the mission,” she says. “But it’s good to have different experiences—and I like my work here in Remote Sensing.”

Claudio Ramirez, a trade commissioner at the Canadian consulate in Miami, left his native Chile when he was only 3 after the overthrow of Salvador Allende. “I had a prominent uncle who was tortured by the authorities,” Claudio recalls. “With the circle of oppression closing in, my father decided it was time to go.”

Growing up in Montreal, Claudio regretted that his only contact with Chilean culture was speaking Spanish at home and enjoying his mother’s Chilean cooking. When he joined DFAIT as a trade commissioner in 2001, he was able to reconnect with his Latin American roots. He has had postings in Latin America, and is president of an association of Latin American trade officers in Miami.

“I’m lucky. I can give something back to Canada—the country that provided safe haven for my family. And at the same time, I’ve found my roots again. It’s a full circle.”