

UNIVERSIDAD DE LOS ANDES
FACULTAD DE HUMANIDADES Y EDUCACION
ESCUELA DE IDIOMAS MODERNOS

**UNA EXPERIENCIA DE APRENDIZAJE
DIPLOMATICA Y PROTOCOLAR EN EL
MINISTERIO DE RELACIONES EXTERIORES**

ANDREA A. SIERRA G.

MERIDA (octubre, 2010)

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EXPERIENCE AT THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN
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Informe final de pasantías presentado por la Br. Andrea A. Sierra G. como requisito parcial para optar al título de Licenciado en Idiomas Modernos

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Nombre y Apellido del Responsable Institucional: Liliana Gamboa

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INTRODUCTION

Protocol is the etiquette of diplomacy and affairs of a state. According to international politics, protocol establishes how an activity should be performed in the field of diplomacy. In the diplomatic field, protocol rules the proper and accepted behavior in matters of state and diplomacy, as a consequence of that, it includes preparing the proper honor for a Head of a state, ranking diplomats in order, setting worktables and events, among others (Merino, 2007).

Diplomacy is the process of negotiations between representatives of international organizations or states. Back in time people who practiced diplomacy were almost always relatives of a ruling family or of very high origin, the main reason was to give these diplomatic representatives legitimacy to negotiate with another state.

The Protocol Direction of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is in charge of all the aspects related to diplomatic protocol, ceremonies, prerogatives, immunities, any events or celebrations regarding the diplomatic missions and international organizations. At the same time, many of these activities take place inside the Ministry, especially those involving the participation of the Diplomatic Corp.

I decided to go to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for my internship because as a student of modern languages and international organizations, I thought it was the right place to complement all the knowledge I had learned at the university. To have

the opportunity to work at the Yellow House made me think I was going to fulfill all my expectations regarding my professional area. The technical knowledge I already had on international organizations gave me confidence to decide that I was prepared to take the chance.

The present report is based on my experience at the Protocol Direction in the Ministry of External Affairs. This report is organized in four sections: the first one offers a technical section, which presents a description, brief history and description of the flowchart of the host institution. The next section presents the nature of the internship: it describes the main duties performed during my internship and the tasks I was assigned for. The reflexive section shows the personal and professional development achieved during my internship. Finally, the last section offers conclusions and recommendations to the host institution and to the School of Modern Languages.

PROFILE OF THE HOST INSTITUTION

The Yellow House is the seat of the Direction of Protocol and Ceremonial, including all the protocol logistics. This department is in charge of all the organization and management of important diplomatic activities held for international guests. At the same time, the Yellow House serves as seat for important meetings and conferences with the Minister of Foreign Affairs because of the architecture and luxury of the building.

The Yellow House is located on the west corner of Bolivar Square in front of the Caracas's Cathedral in Caracas. It is used as seat of some ministerial dependencies. The Yellow House is one of the oldest constructions of the city; built between the XVI and XVII centuries. After the 1641 earthquake in Caracas, most of the structures were affected. Then in 1689, the house was sold to the principal Diego Jimenez de Enciso and under his administration the house was used as a royal jail. This jail was used for important personalities and also for thieves; one of the important personalities of the Venezuelan history who was kept in this jail was Jose Maria España in 1799.

Years later, an important historical event took place in the house on April 19th, 1810. Venezuela's independence was declared by Capitan Vicente de Emparan who stood in one of the balconies in front of all the people from Caracas who supported independence, and he asked to the crowd if they wanted him to continue his

administration; the priest Jose Cortes de Madariaga who stood behind president Emparan did a non signal. People answered to Emparan “NO” then, he replied that he did not want the administration.

Then, in 1877, under the administration of Francisco Linarez Alcantara, the presidential residence was established there and the building was painted yellow. It was done in honor of the Liberal party. From that moment till this day, the house maintains its name. The same year, the house was used as the seat of the Ministry of Foreign affairs, and in 1912 it was officially declared seat of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 1976, the valuable master pieces kept inside the ministry were recognized and in 1979 the Yellow House was declared a National Monument. Then in 1989, the upper part of the House was burned, as consequence several master pieces were destroyed.

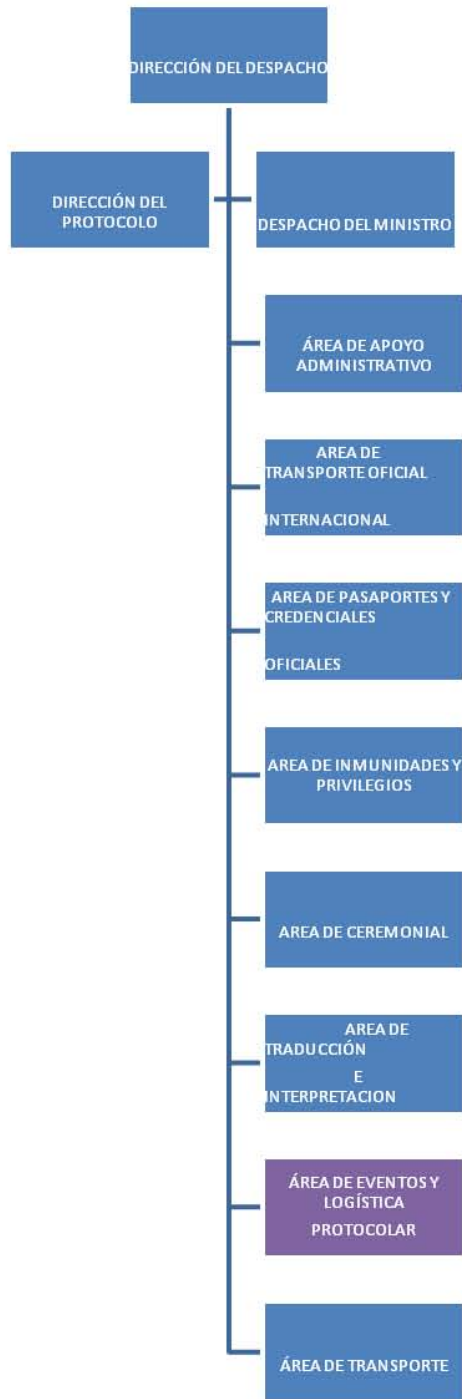
Nowadays, the Ministry of International Affairs (MPPRE for its name in Spanish) has two seats, one is the “Tower” that holds offices for the different departments, administrative offices and vice-ministers’ offices for Latin America, North America, Asia, the Middle East, Oceania, Africa, the Caribbean and Europe. This tower is located on the Urdaneta Avenue. The other seat is the Yellow House, where the minister’s office and the Direction of Protocol and Ceremonial are.

The head of the Direction of Ceremonies has been Mr. Luis Ender Alvarado for several years. He is one of the most important figures in the House. He can handle

all of the logistics and he perfectly knows how to organize the entire protocol for important meetings such as diplomatic visits from foreign countries, the President or its government officials.

Another important staff member is Liliana Gamboa; she is the chief of the Direction of Events and Protocol and she was my direct supervisor. The Protocol Division was organized into several workgroups such as G1, G2, G3, and G4. I was assigned to work in group G4. We had to work on the activities assigned to that particular workgroup; the schedule was assigned by Liliana.

The following flow chart describes the organization of the Yellow House:



NATURE OF THE INTERSHIP

In the Ministry of International Affairs I had to carry out many activities as part of the staff of the Protocol Direction. This part of the report describes all the activities I was assigned, all the experience I had and the things I learned from the job performed during the time of my internship.

As part of the staff of the Protocol Direction, I was required to work from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm, from Monday to Friday and also some extra time when there was an official activity out of regular schedule. The reason why we had to work extra hours was because the Yellow House or the Protocol Direction assists all the activities, conferences, and meetings of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as the private meetings of the Minister.

Due to the fact I was working in the Protocol Direction and therefore needed to attend all the activities mentioned above, I was required to wear a formal uniform just like other staff in the office. I had to wear black pants and a black jacket; the shirt would be of a different color according to each day of the week the following: Black on Monday, red on Tuesday, white on Wednesday, black on Thursday, and blue on Friday.

The Protocol Direction assists many activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and as I was part of a workgroup, we divided the responsibilities and duties

in order to be successful. During my internship, I was assigned the activities described below:

Translations

I did not have office work in the Protocol Direction, but I was sometimes assigned to translate into English some letters and documents for embassies or other offices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I was also asked to translate into English Menus for dinners, identifications for tables and identifications for the staff of the Protocol Direction as well as communications for any meeting at the Yellow House.

Logistics Coordination

As a logistic coordinator, I was assigned to prepare all the things related to any official activity taking place at the House, as well as looking for the appropriate room (depending on the theme of the meeting), the master of ceremony if requested, microphones and audiovisual equipment and the flags of the guest countries. To organize this kind of activities I needed the support of other departments and many people involved with the activity.

Protocol Assistant

The Protocol Direction of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is in charge of the Diplomatic Corp and any other important personality. In this sense, the Direction is the first impression of our country and its government. As a protocol assistant, I had

to receive all the ambassadors before the meetings, conferences, presentation of credentials by Ambassadors, ephemerides and introduce them to the Minister or Vice-minister and make them feel comfortable.

Diplomatic Attaché

During the time of my internship at the Protocol Department, I was assigned once to be an “Attaché.” The word attaché is used for those who play the role of personal assistants to a Diplomat in a diplomatic mission such as: Ambassadors, Ministers, Presidents, and Head of any International Organization. The “Attaché” makes all the necessary arrangements, manages the meeting agenda in order to for it to be accomplished as planned, and coordinates the complete diplomatic mission. The mission includes the reception of the important personalities at the Simon Bolívar international Airport of Maiquetía, then the transport of the diplomatic mission to the Hotel. Immediately, after the arrival of the Diplomatic mission, I had to coordinate the diplomat’s agenda such as meetings, interviews, and everything related to their security, accommodation, and meals.

Assisting the Diplomatic Corp

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is in charge of the Diplomatic Corp and everything related to diplomatic foreign affairs. The main point is to maintain contact with all the diplomatic figures in the country. The department I was assigned to was in charge of organizing private meetings, conferences or presentation of credentials

by ambassadors. In any meeting or activity where a personality of the Diplomatic Corp was involved, we had to do the arrangements to get the room right, place their country's flags properly. We were in charge of the protocol and the success of the activity.

For the presentation of credentials by ambassadors, I had to coordinate with the Logistics Department the places where the Diplomatic Corp would be seated, and I had to elaborate a ranking list with the exact date when all the ambassadors presented their credentials to the President of Venezuela or to the Ministry of International Affairs.

Presidential Visits in Venezuela:

These activities were more complex because it includes the Venezuelan President as well. Principally, we had to coordinate with the Military house (the Presidential Guard of Honor) the agenda of the visiting President. We also had to coordinate accommodation, security, food, transportation for the delegation members, including directors, assistance, and protocol. The most important goal during the visit was to accomplish the agenda because it included meetings with presidents, visiting and host, or several presidents at the same time.

Before the event or meeting, we also had to coordinate the established agenda with the protocol delegation of the guest country, to synchronize their agenda with ours. We had a special meeting with both protocol departments at the hotel where the

guests were staying. Even though I had a huge responsibility in some of the different presidential visits, and we worked almost always under pressure, the task was not difficult to do, because we had a lot of support from other departments of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

REFLECTION ESSAY

After having described all the activities I performed during the time of my internship from a technical point of view, now is the time to describe the way I really felt and what I learnt from those experiences, pointing out what was worth it for me and what made me grow as a future professional.

When I found out I was going to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I was full of expectations and doubts, because I had never left my house to go to another city to work; I thought it would not be an easy situation for me.

When I was at the University, I acquired all the knowledge and the tools I would need to develop my professional life, I was completely sure about the fact that I would know how to solve any task demanded, but that is a wrong idea because you need experience to complement what you already know. After all I lived through in my internship, I realized that experience is what really provides you the real knowledge, anything you learn comes from your experiences and that is what life is about.

At the beginning, I really took into account that the internship was a requirement to get my diploma and I thought about it every day, but then I realized that it was a real job and that I had to give the best of me, I did it. Now I am glad to have changed my mind, because I learnt so many things for my personal life and how

I can adapt myself to different people who, sometimes, were not related to me professionally.

I would like to express myself and show the experiences and the activities that marked me the most and the way I felt and the way they made me grow as a person. Then, I will describe the activities I was assigned to and the things I had to go through.

First impressions

The first day of my internship, I introduced myself to the whole protocol department and principally to the staff of the Direction of Protocol and Events, where I was assigned. I met most of the people who I would work with and then when I was in the office my boss, Ms. Liliana Gamboa, told me I could do whatever I wanted, because there was nothing to do. At first, I was kind of lost and I felt uncomfortable and I asked her several times if I could do some office or paper work while there, and she just replied to me “no, there is nothing to do today.” I did not care too much at the end of that day, but the following days of the week were the same.

I was in shock that first week, and I felt disappointed, because I was full of expectations and seeing the lack of interest at work and everybody doing nothing, I immediately wanted to go back to Merida. Upon arriving, the thing that shocked me the most was to see my co-workers listening to music, gossiping, playing on the Internet and using facebook, or searching for stuff on YouTube. Others would arrive

from the hairdresser or after running personal errands on the street. I could really not believe it, I did not understand what I was doing there, and I thought I was wasting my time there; I actually felt depressed.

This first experience showed me how things are in the bureaucratic realm; I thought at that time that I could not fit in that department, because spending a whole week staring at the window was kind of frustrating for me. I felt all those people were not contributing to my academic and professional experience, as I had expected. On the other hand, I was in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs so, I had to take advantage of that and I could not give up so soon. I decided to talk to the persons in charge of the other directions within the Yellow House to work with them meanwhile. I was accepted in the Immunities Direction, I did not work as the rest of the staff because of my lack of experience in that area, but I learnt all about the paper work related to the passports and the Diplomatic Immunities for the Ambassadors and Diplomatic personalities who need it. I worked with them just a few times, and that helped me to calm down as I felt useful.

A second chance

The first activity I was assigned to by the direction of protocol was the protocol assistance to the visit of the President of Belarus and his wife at the National Assembly to receive all the Diplomatic Corp for a Presidential speech. During this first event, I was excited because at last I was assigned for a task, but at the same time

I was very nervous due to the fact that my knowledge of the State protocol was really vague.

Once at the National Assembly, I did not know for sure what I was supposed to do, and actually I had no idea who the ambassadors were; at that moment I had to guess who was an ambassador and who was not. My order was to receive them and walk with them to their seats and I did so, but at some point, I asked my other partner how would I recognize all the ambassadors. She told me that they were physically different from the others and she left me there; I stood astonished. Later on was the most embarrassing moment of my life, I confused a minister with an ambassador I treated him like an ambassador and he just smiled and told me that I was wrong. I was so embarrassed I could not believe it, but in a way, it was my fault, because I did not know anything about the current administration, or the ministers, or any important personality. After that episode I started to search on the web for the pictures of all the ministers of Venezuela. At the end of the activity, I realized how enlightening this experience was, even though I had made that mistake. I enjoyed it and I learned from that moment on; I felt comfortable at the Protocol Department and for the first time, I realized I really wanted to stay there and to be assigned to many other activities.

Holy Week

The holy week was the busiest week of my internship; we received the visit of the Russian Vice-President Vladimir Putin, and a delegation of about 300 people. The reason for this huge visit was the CIAN¹ event; it took place at the Gran Meliá Hotel and all the meeting rooms were used for this activity. I lived there for 3 days; I had to stay awake till 3:00 in the morning and I had to be prepared at 7:00 o'clock am again. This was the first time I spoke English, because I needed to communicate myself with some people from the delegation and we did it in English. It was amazing for me to talk with them; a moment I had been waiting for since my arrival. Actually, I needed help from one of the Russian protocol assistants, because one of my tasks during that activity was to translate certain keywords from Spanish into Russian. It was not easy, actually I had to look up for a Russian keyboard to translate those words for the working tables. The main topics they dealt with were about agriculture, nuclear energy, engineering, health, tourism. I found this activity very interesting because of the cultural exchange and learning.

Another activity performed the holy week was the ALBA² summit meeting. I was not assigned to do anything in this event, but I went to the National Pantheon where a floral offering was paid. I was so excited to be there because the seven members of the ALBA (Cuba's Raul Castro; Bolivia's Evo Morales; Ecuador's

¹ CIAN work tables for bilateral agreements between Venezuela and Russia.

² ALBA (Alianza Bolivariana para los pueblos de Nuestra América) Trade agreement.

Rafael Correa; Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega; Argentina's Cristina Fernández; the representatives of the Caribbean Islands and Venezuela's Hugo Chávez) were there and I was so close to them. I felt really good to see those presidents in real life. Suddenly one of my partners called me because he needed me to take Piedad Córdoba close to President Chávez and I did so, and I stood beside her, but when President Cristina Fernández saw Piedad Córdoba, she immediately came over where we were and when I realized I was around President Fernández, President Chávez and Ms. Córdoba. I wondered what I was doing there and I quickly moved to another side not to disturb them. It was a good experience to be so close to them when before I had only seen them on the news.

African Week

Another activity I consider important to mention was the African week; I found it very interesting because there were too many things I ignored regarding Africa. For instance, I did not know that Africa has very rich countries and wonderful landscapes apart from the wild Africa we all know. On the other hand, extremely poor countries too which do not have opportunities to end poverty or stop mortal illnesses. African people have serious territorial and religious issues. When I heard about it, I remembered all the course of the professional option International Organization and I feel proud to have at least an idea about some of the topics they were exposing there. I met some of the speakers and I was impressed with them, they were historians and all well educated people who had written many books regarding

African culture. I felt very lucky to have an opportunity to speak personally with them and ask questions about their wonderful culture.

The Protocol Direction was collaborating with the vice-ministry for Africa for this event. My main task in this activity was to place all the country's flags of Africa in alphabetical order, and to place the tables for the speakers. Coordinate the logistic part for the conference and to be in charge of the important guests as the different ambassadors of Africa.

I attended another conference regarding Africa and to my surprise, surely many other people's surprise, a hundred African students from each country of Africa entered the room. Those students are here in Venezuela studying medicine and acquiring all the necessary knowledge to go back to Africa and help their people. From all the things this administration provides to other countries, the African project from my point of view is the best of all because I found that really interesting just because it is a very important social and cultural contribution. The reason because they went to that activity was to show in some way the bilateral agreement between Venezuela and Africa, and how good it was. For me, that moment was a little more about politics, but in any way I liked it.

After this event was done, I felt satisfied with all the new things I had learned and the people I had met. Very rarely you have the opportunity to live that kind of experiences so I felt glad for being there. I received a gratitude diploma from the

Vice-Ministry for Africa for my participation in the event. I was very thankful to them and actually really happy to have been part of such activity.

During the time of my internship at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I realized that as a future professional I was not complementing my academic preparation as a modern language student. Most of the tasks I was assigned at the Protocol Direction were principally focused on protocol and coordinating diplomatic events, but not focused on the use of foreign languages. I did not have the chance to further develop my knowledge of English or French as I had expected. I could say I did not learn anything else regarding languages; this internship was not worth while for me academically, that is, regarding the use of foreign languages. However, I may say that from the point of view of International Organizations, the work at the Protocol Direction was more related to my previous studies in the sense that I already had knowledge about the important public figures I was dealing with, and I could have my point of view regarding some agreements with other countries, because I already knew the background of those countries or their administrations.

On the other hand, from the personal point of view it was a good experience for me to learn so many things about protocol and ceremony, how to organize an activity for diplomatic personalities, how to adapt myself to a work environment. Being there gave me the chance of meeting many important people and good people. The thing that impacted me the most was to realize that people in charge of the whole protocol Direction and even the Ministry have no idea about a professional from the

field of Modern Languages and they do not take into account our skills in foreign languages nor the fact that we can be very useful in a workplace that is always visited by foreigners.

CONCLUSIONS

After finishing my internship at the Ministry of External Affairs I can say it was one of the best personal experiences I have had. I had not worked before and I learned how to manage myself in a work environment. As an intern at the Yellow House, I thought I would be complementing my professional skills in the area of English and French, but my internship did not fulfill my expectations. In addition, I personally felt I was not moving forward according to the idea I had about being at a Ministry of External Affairs. In a way, I used the knowledge I acquired in the School of Modern Languages regarding International Organizations, but most of the time it was about protocol and everything related to it.

In this regard, I learned new things such as: how to prepare an activity for a Diplomatic Corp, how to treat them, but it was not enough for me. I studied Modern Languages and I spoke English only twice, once at the CIAN event (work tables for bilateral agreements between Venezuela and Russia) and the second time with the Ambassador of Trinidad and Tobago.

At the end of my internship, I was a bit disappointed in the sense that I had not been able to practice languages; however, I cannot say that it was the same for my other partners, maybe for them it was completely different, but for me it was not good enough. To conclude, I can say that I had a really good experience working at the

Yellow House in general; I learnt many things such as working with new people, taking important responsibilities, and being professional no matter what.

In addition, I would like to point out that the staff I worked with was very receptive and they were a great team; I am really grateful for that. It was a great opportunity working at the Ministry of External affairs, and this internship experience helped me to know what I would really like to do after graduating and what are my options as a professional. Even though my internship did not fulfill my expectations, I do not think I wasted time; I learned a lot of new things that may be useful at some point of my life.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I would like to present some recommendations to the host institution and to the School of Modern languages in order to improve important details of the internship at the Yellow House.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should:

- improve the language training of all the employees at the Protocol Direction, the institution has to be conscious about the professional level of its staff.
- have a better distribution of the tasks assigned, to avoid the overcharge of some employees.
- improve logistics to avoid the lack of audiovisual equipment, interpreters, or even transportation that sometimes cause inconveniences and delays on the organization of an event and it shows disorganization in front of international visitors.

The school of Modern Languages should:

- focus the profile of the student of Modern Languages to a specific area, such as International Organization or to the student's professional option. The School of Modern Languages should specify a more complete and specific curriculum that describes the skills of the student; this would help a lot of students to carry out their internship successfully. In other way the student

would be exposed to be assigned to many different tasks not related to the student's field.

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