

At the helm of IMA

Pioneering, inspirational and tenacious are just some of the words used to describe *Sonia Vanular*, founder of the European Association for Professional Secretaries (EAPS), which later became European Management Assistants (EUMA) and is now known as IMA - International Management Assistants. *Annie Waddington-Feather* talks to the lady herself...

At 95 years old – turning 96 this month – she’s seen a few changes in her lifetime. Her varied career began with training to be a lawyer and, after WW2, she worked at a college as a secretary. In 17 years she helped it grow from 32 students to 500. She says it was a nice and friendly place and she loved working there but, despite the talk of a directorship, it never materialised – so she made a change.

“I was a war widow and had no children so I had to make my own life,” she says. “I decided I wanted to travel the world.”

In those days, Sonia explains, everyone in management spoke French so she decided to go to France for three months: “I thought I could learn French then travel the world; I could get a secretary job anywhere. But I got a job in France and stayed.”

Sonia says she enjoyed the French

attitude to work, particularly the ‘faire le pont’. Literally meaning ‘to make a bridge,’ it refers to the practice of people taking an extra day off when there is a bank holiday.

Turning points

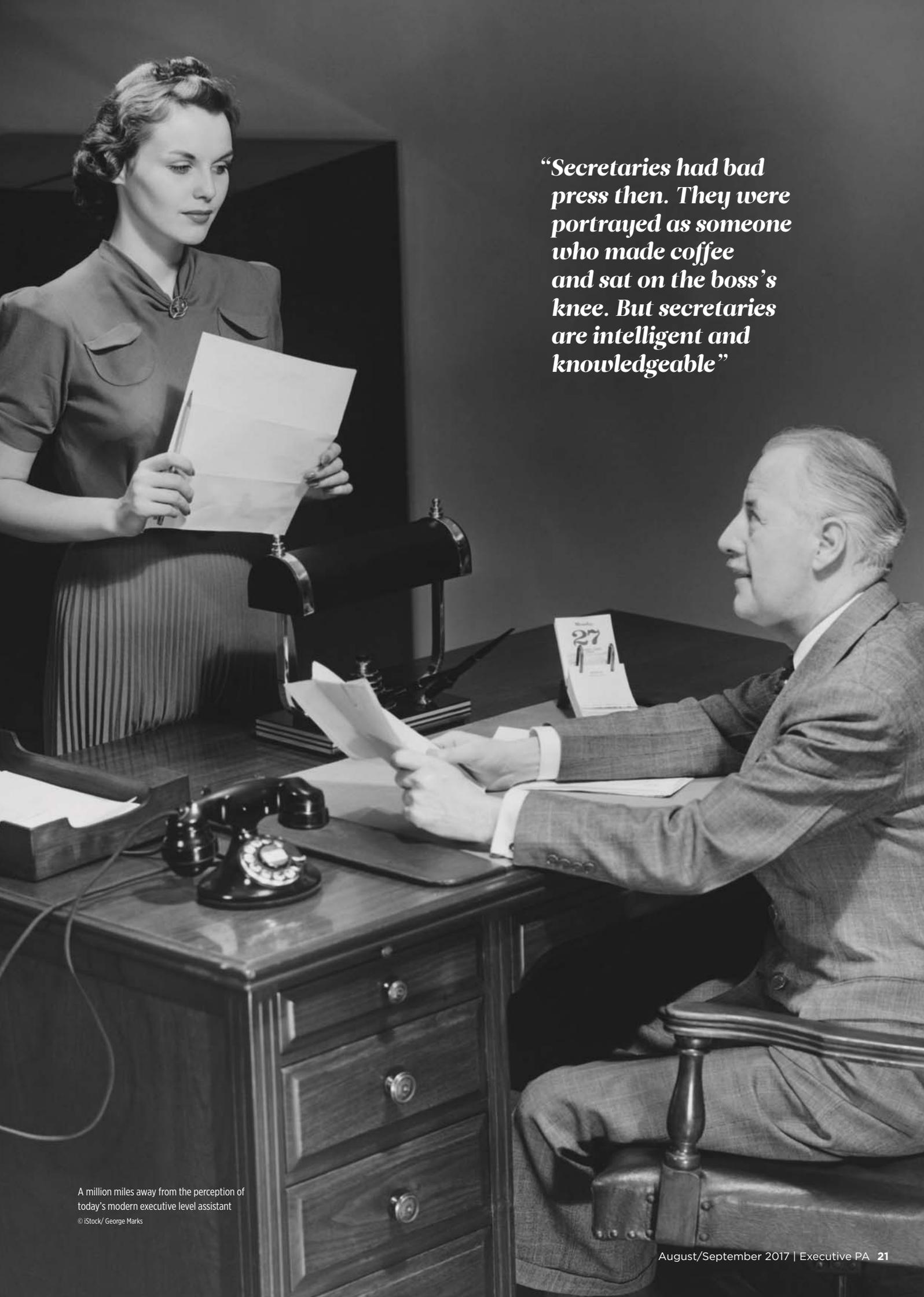
She began as an administrative assistant for the American army, jokingly saying she got her promotion because she made good coffee. However, it was when working for IBM as a training consultant that Sonia realised the computer would change the role of the secretary.

“At the time, secretaries were just sitting in typing pools,” she explains. “But with the computer, some of her work would be taken away from her; one click on the boss’s computer and it’s all done.”

Sonia also realised the profession needed to be recognised in its own ➔



Sonia in Hamburg, Germany in 2011



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The idea to form a professional organisation came to her in the early 1970s at the executive secretary seminars she was chairing at the time: “I was coming across secretaries from all over Europe and many were saying ‘I’m only a secretary’ and thinking it was a ‘no-go job’ so I proposed we should form a group.”

Not everyone thought it was a good idea initially: “Some girls thought I was doing it for myself, but I was doing it for presenting the group to the world,” she says. “I’m very tenacious when I make up my mind.”

The changing role

Sonia highlights that when she started, a PA worked for only one person, which is often no longer the case: “The role has changed, but it still does everything no-one wants to do or can do.”

Then there’s technology. This has really changed the way we work, Sonia says, but she admits now it’s not her strong point: “I have problems with

passwords – and retrieving them!”

One thing she does note is the change in attitudes to women: “I grew up in at a time where if a man invited you out, you cancelled the ‘woman’ appointment. Women tended to be somewhat subservient to men. My husband said secretaries suffered from a double disability; they’re subservient to one person and they’re a woman.”

Undeterred, she landed roles traditionally held by men and, fortunately, had some forward-thinking managers: “IBM Europe was a very good company; it made an attempt to give us equal opportunities,” she recalls.

Sonia remembers an incident when she was standing in for a financial director: “Every year there was a meeting of financial directors. The man running the meeting asked my boss, who was the CEO, who he was sending. He said ‘Sonia,’” she recalls. “‘But she’s a woman’ the man said.” The CEO still sent her.

The PA of the future

Several years ago, Sonia asked the management consultant Peter Drucker what he thought the future of the PA would be. She explains: “He forecast the personal secretary would no longer exist, but a really good secretary is an enormous asset to a company.”

Now, she believes the position is constantly evolving and is delighted that EUMA has gone international as IMA: “We started to get requests from other countries to join, so it had to go international,” she says. “We’ve got a very good woman in the Chair too.”

However, she highlights that no matter how good you are, you’re not indispensable: “When I was a trainer for a management consultancy, I was the only person who spoke English so I wrote all my own letters.” And, even now, she still does all her own administrative work.

Today, fully retired Sonia says she’s finally doing what she originally intended to do all those years ago: travel. Last week she was seeing friends in London; this week at home in Paris, and next week she’s seeing an opera in Verona. But she still keeps dates in spring and autumn free to attend IMA conferences: “It’s my baby,” she concludes. ☘



ADVICE

Sonia’s top tips

Learn to be flexible: “You must adapt to different circumstances and be part of the team.”

Be yourself and speak up: “Don’t be scared people won’t approve of what you’re saying. People appreciate straightforward talking; but don’t be rude. It’s perfectly reasonable to speak up, as you are as much a part of the company as the MD. You’re all moving in the same direction, so stand up and speak up for yourself.”

Give yourself time for personal development: “It is very important to keep learning. If you’re not learning, it’s not a good thing.”

As well as knowing your boss and the office, get to know the whole company: “Knowing the company and its background really should be part of the job.”

Get yourself a good boss: “If you have a bad boss, don’t stay – it’s not a good idea if your working life has no joy in it.”

Learn traditional secretary skills: “I can’t understand why they don’t teach people to touch-type these days; it saves an enormous amount of time and I’m not sorry I learned shorthand either.”

Finally, Sonia believes lot of the PA’s role has to do with personality and this, she believes, can partly determine whether you’re successful or not: “You need the ability to adjust to all different people. You’ve got to be polite and nice to everybody in any job. As a trainer, I always said ‘make yourself be liked’ – it’s part of the job to make yourself be accepted. You don’t want to be the one in the office where they say ‘oh my god, here she comes’.”

THE ORGANISATION



IMA - International Management Assistants is today a global and high quality network of management support professionals. The association’s main aims are the personal and professional development of its members, as well as the continued evolution of the management support profession. IMA members have access to a professional network, which encompasses a range of business cultures, languages and lifestyles, but also provides a place where everyone is on common ground in a safe and proactive environment. The association, which is a self-development organisation with no political aims and no trade-union activities, is currently represented in more than 25 countries. www.ima-network.org