

From Bob Block - thought you might enjoy this. If you receive multiple times please let me know and I'll clean up my contact list. Also, if you would like to be removed from future update kindly let me know and I will adjust the list accordingly

Bob

### **30 years in Europe – a retrospective - December 9, 1990 to present - It's been a cracking time**

It was a crisp October evening in Denver, 1990. I was sitting in the living room of my 100 year old red brick craftsman bungalow listening to music with the fireplace roaring. My two cats sleeping contentedly together on a chair in front of it. The phone rang and the familiar voice of a New York-based headhunter greeted me. After a bit of banter he asked what was an often-phrased question: "Hey Bob, I have an executive search that is very unique; do you know somebody who may be interested in working over in Europe?" (For those who are familiar, this was typically the way a headhunter would 'fish' to see if the person they are calling may personally be interested) This was a headhunter who called often and I always referred other individuals to him as I had terrific well-paying jobs, a great lifestyle living in Denver which was perhaps 1 ½ to 2 Hours' drive to a wide variety of world-class ski areas, national parks and of course the Rocky Mountains plus being one of America's Most Livable Cities. In addition, for literally my entire career I've only had a maximum 10-minute commute from my home to any office I worked in. Also, many good friends. What was not to love?

However, this call was unique; Europe? "Hmm, tell me more". So, the conversation became a real sales pitch from his side about a private equity funded broadband startup in central Europe. They were looking for an experienced person who could hit the ground running as vice president of marketing/sales/programming and customer service. Terrific six-figure plus package, outstanding benefits including a couple of roundtrips back to the US per year, vehicle, housing covered, tax equalization and so forth. To make a long story short I figured: what an interesting proposition, what do I have to lose? If it doesn't work out for whatever reason I can always return to Denver or anywhere in the US for that matter and find a new opportunity. So, I gave my two months' notice at my existing employer. Put all my furniture and household items into storage, rented the house out and sent a shipping container of personal effects over to Gdansk Poland where we initially based our operation to begin building broadband networks in approximately 10 of the largest metropolitan areas of Poland.

Upon arriving in Poland, I was whisked to the Marriott Hotel in Warsaw just before Christmas and it was a wonderful place. The 15-meter Christmas tree in the lobby, live chamber music being played, everyone spoke English it felt almost like New York. Then the next day I walked out into Warsaw, it was a different world. Remember, this was 1990 the Berlin wall fell in 1989 only one year before. There was nothing, it was like walking into a world of more shades of gray than one could imagine; there was no color whatsoever. No Christmas lights, no joy, not much in the stores, no one spoke English, no one smiled, everyone and everything was gray. It was a rude awakening. Not a lick of English anywhere, only a strange language 90% of what were consonants (I knew what it must feel like to be dyslexic) Here is a word for you as an extreme example: **Jazgarzewszczyzna** 😊

**It was like landing on Mars.**





I made my way up to Gdansk and found a house to rent for about \$500 a month which to the owner was like El Dorado. The dollar was king and \$500 was a king's ransom. To make the Gdansk story short we did indeed start the company there and for PR purposes we arranged it so our first customer and in fact the first broadband customer in Poland was the country's president Lech Walesa. It achieved my objective of gaining national PR attention with photos of him and his wife and me and some of our staffers with interviews etc. in the national and European media. We had a team of a handful of experienced expats mainly on the technical/engineering/construction side and hired literally hundreds of Poles - none had ever been in business before and only a couple spoke English - prized hires were bilingual folks and translators. The expats trained the Poles who learned fast and became an effective, well motivated team - they loved working with westerners and we treated them really well. Many went on to excellent careers with the company or outside and ended up with executive level positions and some even became dollar millionaires - very proud of each and every one of them in one way or another.



After Gdansk we did in fact build out 10 areas around the country and became the predominant broadband provider by far. Day to day life was always a circus; coming from

the US where we had literally everything, 90% of what we had was missing in Poland or was quite odd. Nothing was familiar at all, not a single 'touchstone' to lean on. For example, people in Poland would put ketchup on their pizza – Imagine that! – a real head-slap moment - one of many. The worst Chinese food you ever ate in the US or UK you would consider acceptable in Poland. There was really NO ICE at all – anywhere. One of the things you learned was to be creative and develop solutions to fit your needs. There was not 1 shopping cart in the country, all stores were tiny, no products had English names or labels, the only way to get an English newspaper was at the Marriott in Warsaw and it was always at least 5 days old - USA Today was the only one and I used to call it 'USA Last Week', of course there was no Internet either then. I did get CNN however in my office. For example, with respect to the ice, there were no ice trays in the country, zero, nada, überhaupt keine. After an exhausting search, I confirmed that sad and startling fact. However, as a workaround after a lot of thought and an eureka moment after seeing an old woman selling piles of plastic things I bought some of these below which were plastic egg carriers. I cut the plastic hinges off and filled them with water to make half round ice cubes. Not elegant but a workable solution to one of life's many challenges in a recently past socialistic society - remember the Berlin Wall came down just a year before I arrived and not long before that there were breadlines, no toilet paper, little or no citrus etc. ....



Another amusing example was there were literally no showers. People sat in their bathtubs and had a hose attached to the faucet with a plastic spray head and the tub was always 15cm from the wall so you could imagine that there was always a flood in the bathroom when I attempted to take a standing shower (no shower curtains of course. Fed up quickly; not for this boy - grabbed my PA and one of our guys and I drew a diagram of an oval pipe. I had her explain that I wanted someone to acquire some copper pipe and bend it into an oval the size of a bathtub, figure a way to hang it from the ceiling etc. While that was being done we went on a search for shower curtains in a land that had no showers - after over a week we found an obscure place that had a stack of about 6 - all different of course so I bought 4 - one was Mickey Mouse, another was a shocking green - you get the picture. Then - shower curtain hooks - huh?! Wee, the hunt for those was unsuccessful and I ended up using tie-wraps (you know - those plastic things that cops use for handcuffs and are also used to bundle wires) Not elegant but I had a shower! Life improved dramatically.

This type of thing was an **everyday occurrence**, sometimes annoying sometimes amusing but in the big picture a bit of a training program on how to survive in a strange land. I have a thousand stories like this that are best told with a glass or two of bourbon in front of a roaring fireplace.

## **On to London**





As a result of our early success, we caught the eye of many international telecommunications groups. We spent a fair amount of time shepherding many of them around Poland on due diligence trips as they were interested in acquiring our company. After one of these dog and pony shows a London based international group approached me about working for them in the UK. After having spent time in the gray land of Poland London and the UK were like the promised land for me. We made a deal I moved to London rented a terrific flat in a part of London called Hampstead which is one of the greenest and toniest areas in the London area (the 2 photos on the right above are of Hampstead and I lived on a lane just like the one in the centre in a wonderful 2 floor flat with an atrium, a patio and a prized private parking spot). I only had a 50 m walk from my door to the Tube and generally only a 20 minute ride to the office I had in Camden Town and one close to the Soho area on Tottenham Court, Road. I also worked on projects not only in London but in Birmingham, Cambridge, East Anglia and the Newcastle area. The nature of my work was such that generally I only needed to show my face in the office perhaps every other day and could conduct most of my business from my flat. It was paradise; within 100m were dozens of classic pubs, green-grocers, butchers and every other imaginable convenience. In addition I had the chance to travel literally through the entire United Kingdom including of course Scotland, England, Northern Ireland, the Irish Republic and some of Wales. Driving on the left side of the road was initially a challenge in particular since my company vehicle was a manual BMW shift with the stick on the left. I have to say that I love driving on the left side even today when we visit the UK as it really puts the fun back into driving again.

## **Back to Poland**

I received a call from the investment principals of the original Polish operation from the US bemoaning the fact that they were having significant management problems in Poland. Would I consider returning to help turn around the operation? Leaving the UK for me to return to Poland was quite difficult, however after significant financial negotiations I decided it was worth doing. I negotiated a two-year agreement with a one-year break clause that only I could execute with of course significant compensation. It was quite a challenge to jump back in and to determine why the ship was listing so badly and what needed to be done to right it and get it moving in the proper direction. It was one of those 24/7 types of parachuting in situations which required a tremendous amount of stamina, creativity and

finesse with an occasional bludgeoning to obtain the results I was hired to produce. It was both draining and invigorating to achieve the turnaround.

Just toward the end of that first year **the phone rang again with a headhunter on the line.** "Hey Bob, how are things in Poland? What you think about another startup?" "Hmmm, perhaps. I'm just finishing the end of the one-year break period in a contract I have in Poland. Tell me about what you're thinking, what's the play, where it would be based, who are the investors, what type of compensation package and contract are they looking at". Well, the stars were aligned perfectly and I made my way to Vienna - Paradise

## **Vienna Austria**



I accepted a position as Regional Vice President of operations to develop business opportunities in the countries of Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova and the Republic of Georgia. Each of these countries could have their own stories however let it be said that individually they are unique and presented their own fascinating tales. Needless to say my passport constantly needed to have extra sections installed at the American Embassy as each of the countries required multiple visas stamps in and out etc. The highlight without a doubt was living in the Imperial city of Vienna Austria. My wife Ewa and I lived in the center of the old city of Vienna which consisted of winding cobblestone small lanes and market squares. We rented a rooftop apartment with a large patio where we overlooked all of

Vienna and to the west the beginning of the mountains. Given the nature of my work I had an enormous amount of free time in Vienna with Ewa. We were fortunate enough to be able to explore the nooks and crannies of literally the entire city of Vienna over the years while we were there. Vienna for us was paradise in all ways during all seasons with beautiful parks and the Danube River during the summer and the famous Chris Kindle markets during the Christmas season with hot chestnuts and spiced wine everywhere. Prior to Ewa arriving I spent time exploring the neighborhood and happened upon a local Viennese pub. I made friends with an old Viennese gentleman named Gert who spoke English and we became "pub buddies" he in turn introduced me to the pub owner Kristina who even to this day is a close friend of mine. (I consider her my most mature girlfriend as she is a bit older than me; and my wife approves) Kristina in turn, after we got to know each other brought me to what is called the **Stammtisch** which in essence is the "owners table" where she and her close friends would meet and hold court so to speak. This was quite an honor and as a result I met many very nice people of all types of background and ages. **For me personally this was one of the highlights of my time in Vienna.** Of course, Ewa and I also traveled extensively through Austria and surrounding countries such as Slovenia while we were there.

## **Poland 3rd time a charm**

Back during the .com bubble when money was growing on trees a US-based company acquired the Polish operation from the original investment group. I had known some of the US-based folks as they were from Denver. They contacted me while we were in Vienna and suggested and cajoled me to return to Poland as Senior Vice President of their company. My role was to help them understand and unwind the huge investment they made as some of the pieces were a bit opaque and I generally knew where the bodies were buried. I took some time there and was then offered an interim position as Chief Operating Officer at another large broadband group. I'd found it to be a position that I did not want to progress from interim to permanent and really had no further interest in having six senior directors (VP's in the West) reporting to me and under them approximately 400 employees; I did the math and determined that at the age of 49 I had enough funding so to speak to retire. This was rather than live with the intensity of the daily pull from investors and shareholders and the oversight of over 400 employees. Life was too short and soul searching led me to say, 'we can do this'.. As fate would have it, I resigned the morning of September 11, 2001 which given the six-hour time difference between Europe and New York it proceeded the attacks in New York. My wife was in the UK visiting one of her nieces at the time so I was alone in Poland. I heard about the attacks on the radio as I was returning to the house later that day with a cooler full of ribs, steaks, wine and of course at the time cigarettes to enjoy the beginning of retirement. Ewa would return to Poland once aviation got up and running again.

## **Retirement/Block & Associates**

Since 2001 I have been operating the small consultancy business called Block & Associates ([www.blockassociates.org](http://www.blockassociates.org)) which I primarily do to keep my mind sharp and put a little bread on the table. Generally, however we spend a substantial amount of time traveling both in Europe and annually in the US. We have been in all countries of Europe large and small (except Finland, Bulgaria and Montenegro – but there is still time) While in the US we typically take a few weeks or a month and do road trips primarily in the Western United States to the national parks. In Europe we often throw the bikes on the car and do extensive bike trips for example through the Netherlands during tulip season, down the Danube from Vienna to Germany, down what is called Romantische Straße in Bavaria and

other locations throughout Europe. Here are some highlights of our travels both in the US and Europe: [www.blockimages.com](http://www.blockimages.com) We love our European road trips - every country is different. We relish the variety, the people, scenery, history, food etc and of course the languages. Not much better than being able to have a beer and laugh with folks in different languages - you never know who you meet along the way as well. Wonderful

Below: From left to right: **Neuschwanstein** Castle is a 19th-century romantic eclecticism palace on a rugged hill above the village of Hohenschwangau near Füssen in southwest Bavaria which was at the end of our 400km bike ride down Romantische Straße, **Keukenhof** also known as the Garden of Europe, is one of the world's largest flower gardens, situated in the town of Lisse, in the Netherlands where we rode and finally a view of the **Dolomites** in northeastern Italy (more on our blockimages website)





## What will the future bring?

**Hopefully for everyone - health, love, happiness and financial independence.** With COVID-19, 2020 travel was limited to some bike trips around Poland. We assume the coming year will be somewhat constricted as well however we are hopeful that we can get on the road again in the near future. As soon as we can the plan is for a trip to the US and also at least a month-long road trip around Europe. In terms of living locations, we really don't spend a lot of time focusing on that as we have a home in Denver that we rent out and another one near Warsaw Poland where we spend the lion's share of our time these days. Warsaw is a pretty good jumping off spot for European travel as most of Europe is within one to two hours flight time with very good connections from here. We can get to Germany by car in about five hours. Additionally, over all the cost of living in this area is minimal for us as we own the house and general goods and services with the exception of food probably run 30% or less of what it would cost the US or UK. Gasoline for the car however runs about four times higher than the US but we drive a hybrid which just sips gas in town so we don't really feel it.

Finally, I will end this long tome by saying it would be nice to stay in touch. [blockimages@gmail.com](mailto:blockimages@gmail.com) is the best email address. Drop a phone# and we can chat some time

All the best!

Bob

