Canpol Babies

*A Success Story from Poland*

Helen Kelly

*Canpol sp. z o.o. is Eastern Europe’s most successful baby accessories company with 600 plus products in the range and distributors in more than two dozen countries. Helen Kelly talked with Canpol founder and Managing Director Krzysztof Biedrzycki about the company’s uncommon beginnings, doing business in Poland, and the keys to his impressive success.*

Perhaps because he was born under Communist rule in 1953, I expected Kris Biedrzycki to be slightly sad-eyed with remains of old resignation framing a lined face that had known the awful boredom and hideous restrictions of a former Communist state. I thought maybe he’d be grim, like the concrete buildings still lining some streets in downtown Warsaw.

My picture couldn’t have been more wrong.

I didn’t contain a laugh and told him about the gloomy aura I’d imagined. He laughed, in turn. “It could have been like that,” he said. “Before 1989 it was bleak, especially if you wanted something pretty to enjoy. We shopped in dark places for drab items and were grateful if we just found provisions.

Kris (left) and his brother Tom
"But there were places of hope, called the Komis, where we could sell gifts from abroad, should we be fortunate enough to receive any. Rumours would spread wildly and you’d queue for things that mostly never arrived, always dreaming that one day things you’d seen in a picture somewhere or heard about might appear. And then,” he said, “one day something did.”

And so began his story and quite a story it is, really, considering that the company has grown year on year for fifteen years without a downturn, that they started with one product and grew to 600, each passing stringent safety tests, and moved from import to manufacturing and packaging on their own custom-designed machines—all without ever a penny of debt.

“IT was 1980,” he began. “My brother-in-law and his wife were expecting a baby. On one of her routine just-in-case visits to the Komis shop, my mother-in-law found a single beautiful baby bottle, boxed and beribboned, which had come from Cannon Rubber in England. We gathered round and couldn’t believe our luck.

"Everyone was so delighted I was inspired to send my secret dollars – I had $200 hidden away - to Cannon Rubber asking them to send a small box of baby bottles as gifts to everyone in my family. We put the bottles in the Komis shops and within two days had sold them all.

Komis
"We were happy with the extra money and happy that many people had bottles, and I went on to the career I’d planned as a food technology engineer.

"Now, we fast forward to 1986. I was enjoying a satisfying career, so pleased with the academic life - asking questions, following lines of inquiry, deciding on the best solutions - I decided to take a PhD and do research, which brought abundant rewards. The Fulbright Committee selected me as a Fulbright Fellow, and I was invited to lecture at the University of Missouri in the United States.

"Again, I couldn’t believe my luck. After sixteen wonderful months in the US, I returned to Poland full of happiness – and $2000 to refill my dollar box. With great pleasure I took up a lecturer’s post, welcomed by the faculty and assured of a distinguished future.

"So I was teaching and enjoying my research – and yes, dreaming of regime change but only as we might imagine winning the lottery - when one day in 1989 the Communists did fall.

Lech Wałęsa
Solidarity Leader and President of Poland from 1989 to 1995

**Import the bottles**

"On that day – and quite suddenly – I remembered: we could import the bottles. I ran to tell my astonished wife: we could import the bottles."

“Bottles? What bottles? What are you talking about?”

“The bottles; the beautiful baby bottles from England; we can import them.” I was so excited I could hardly talk.

"I phoned my brother, and he agreed to become my partner and I made arrangements to leave the University and we sent the $2000 to Cannon Rubber - and since we were in the middle of nowhere Cannon said “Why not?” we could sell their bottles, and well ... that was that. After three years we hired our first employee and now we are ninety. It’s been wonderful. And I spend my time providing beautiful things for babies."
Trust

Non-stop growth, six hundred products, custom manufacturing and never penny of debt? One might wonder whether Kris has spent every spare moment reading management books or all his spare cash on management consultants.

But he doesn’t read management books, he has not had management training, and he has never hired a management consultant. He works from his instincts and beliefs about the benefits to business of open personalities, inquiring minds, and quality products, though he said he’d never tried to quantify what he does, how he works, or the basis on which he makes management decisions.

At the heart of things, Kris hires people he trusts personally and professionally; and he determines whether he can trust a person by looking in her or his eyes. “People you can trust are trusting in return. They are open and warm. They like ideas. They’ll be resourceful, ask questions, learn from others and from mistakes, imagine a future, and have a sense of purpose. If you are not trusting, you can’t hide it; it shows in your eyes.”

“After all,” he suggests, “everyone prefers to be open, emotionally and professionally. No one wants to waste time faking things, so why do it, with all the unpleasantness that goes with pretending? I want people to be fully themselves, not partly hidden while at work.”

“As to managing people,” Kris says, “I don’t manage anyone. Mostly I guide people.

“You see, I treat people as I want them to treat me. I don’t want someone asking me to obey a critical boss. I do want to contribute, do quality work, feel part of a team, and have support and guidance when I am unsure or wrong. All people want the same. So all of us are a team, I provide guidance for the senior managers and they do likewise for their own people.”

When it comes to managing the business, Kris says the principal influence is his academic training.
“A lot of people think that we grew because we are in Poland,” he said. “Yes, we were among the first, so we had the chance to prove ourselves. But companies sprung up everywhere like field flowers in a fresh spring meadow. So very soon we had competitors and now we are in a highly competitive environment.

“So doing business in Poland is like doing business anywhere: there are customers and markets and competitors; there are taxes and regulations and rules. In fact Poland isn’t special.

We grow for the same reasons other companies succeed: because of our people and because we are systematic and rigorous about quality in two things,” he went on.

“One is that we are rigorous about careful planning. When there is any decision to take, I expect each employee to consider options and the different roads to travel; then to project where each road might lead and the costs. We take this approach whether discussing a new stock system or a major manufacturing system, a new way to answer the phone or a new packaging design. We make decisions and act after examining things thoroughly in discussion with others.

“This I require of all employees. We believe that thinking this way about making decisions and solving problems is the best way for employees to be happy and the best way to gain business results.”

Virtually all Canpol babies’ employees hold a university degree and many have some research training. None has an MBA.

**Quality**

“Then, we will only make quality products safest for baby, being sure that it is quality all families can afford. That is why we decided to build our own machines to make bottles and teats. It is too easy to buy feeding products that cause baby to have colic.
“We require our suppliers to follow this same code of quality and we educate our customers about quality, safety and baby care. In general, we want all families to have baby products that are fine quality, affordable and pretty.”

I pinch myself and ask to have a word with some of his management team, and he invites me to phone who I will.

“I love this company,” Ms. Ewa Rdest, Canpol babies’ Worldwide Sales Director told me. “Sometimes we work so many hours we think we’ll sleep at the office; yet we are content. We speak openly and we are free to propose ideas and pursue them as long as we can present a sound basis for our thinking. We can act quickly because we have authority. However when I make a mistake, I call either Kris or Tom, depending on what kind of mistake it is. We work out what might have gone wrong and how to move ahead.

“Sometimes I am upset and disappointed and worried, but I am never frightened. I know that their respect for me will continue uninterrupted. This is liberating. What else might one wish from work?”

A love for beauty in all things, intellectual rigour, commitment to quality, an active TQM practice in place, persistence in planning, and enormous pleasure in other people; questions, trust, kindness and guidance; I mention to Kris that some might find it difficult to train a manager in these things.

**Strong views**

“Oh,” he said, “I have a quite strong view here. I think some people have business talent, like management or finance or marketing or sales, and some don’t, just like some people have musical talent or cartoon skills.

“In fact I don’t think you can train a person to manage people. You can enlighten someone about being open and about planning rigorously by doing those things yourself, and discussing it. But if a person doesn’t change from the inside, it won’t be real and it won’t make a difference. And not everyone is open to that kind of change.”
The learning organisation

If the learning organisation implies the top person leads a learning life – and perforce hires likeminded people - then Canpol is the archetype learning organisation. Kris says he understands my thought.

“My family encouraged me to trust people, speak openly, and ask questions as the best way to ensure myself a happy life. They told me that the life of my mind could transcend even the cold life under communism. They were right about all that. But no one is perfect; they also suggested I find a way to leave Poland,” he said, his eyes twinkling.

“I never wanted to do that. I’m so glad to be exactly where I am.”

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http://www.twmacademy.com/articles/detail.asp?ArticleNo=1239