

## The Export Manager's Tale

People working in the wine business arrive by different routes. Some, like me, had a crazy business idea and gave it a go. Others get jobs as graduate trainees with major retailers and end up in the wine buying department. Many are passionate about wine and do anything they can to find a job that immerses them in it. But the outsiders, like Jan Kaspar, get there by much more fantastical routes.

This is Jan's story. It begins in the early 1990's when I was looking for wine supply partners in the newly free countries of Eastern Europe. I am confident every word of it is true.

"They are lazy fucking bastards"

It was his explanation for every problem. His countrymen were idle time wasters who needed their heads knocking together. The country was a basket case. The only way to get anything done was to do it himself.

In 1993 Jan Kaspar was the export manager of Vinium, an enormous winery in the village of Velke Pavolice in Moravia, the southern Czech wine producing region that borders northern Austria. This was middle Europe's Alsace, with wines at a fraction of the price.

Vinium was the answer to my search for a Czech winery that would allow us to custom make wines for the UK market. We flew in our young Australian winemakers and made Grunerveltiner, Gewurztraminer, Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Blanc, Frankovka and St Laurent which sold at prices from £2.99 to £3.99 in Safeway, Sainsbury, Co-op, Asda and Victoria Wine.

Encouraged by big UK retailers' enthusiasm for new countries and unusual grape varieties these were heady, pioneering days for rock and roll winemaking projects.

But twenty years ago Vinium was a tough place to make modern wines. The local mind set had frozen when the Berlin wall fell in 1989. The ethos remained one of Soviet quantity not Western

quality. The Czechs stored their wine in open topped fibre glass vats and watched it turn brown; there was no cold stabilisation machinery so we pumped the wine outside and waited for the temperature to drop below minus 5 Celsius; in summer when the temperature reversed, the bottled wine cellar reached a flavour destroying 35 degrees.

We would not have made wine good enough for the UK's major retailers without Jan cracking heads. The Aussies worked 24/7 but still couldn't manage to complete all the tasks - they needed help in the cellar. Jan bypassed the bureaucracy and got us a cellar hand. The yeast we needed wasn't ordered. Jan found another way to get it to us on time. Urgent orders were not despatched because the export papers had not been processed by the Government. Jan got hold of the official seal and stamped them himself.

Jan was short and brash, an ambitious energy ball who would have been at home in the raw, red meat capitalism of 1920's America. His self belief made him a master at navigating his world. He liked money for what it gave him access to, not for its own sake.

In his modestly furnished apartment an enormous poster bestrode the wall beside his bed. A North American Indian woman stood on a huge rock, gazing into the distance. Underneath her was this warning:

"Only after the last tree has been cut down, only after the last river has been poisoned, only after the last the last fish has been caught, only then will you find that money can't be eaten"

I couldn't square this sentiment with Jan's go-getting, take-no-prisoners character until many years later when we met again and he told me his story.

### **Humble beginnings**

"I grew up in Zlin and my parents worked in the Bata shoe factory. I studied construction in secondary school, so I was supposed to draw plans for buildings, or work as a boss on a construction

site, which is what I did before the 1989 revolution, and it was not bad, because you were in the open air and could see some results immediately, and that's what I like.

I should have gone to University but they stopped me because of my political opinions. You know what happened? I played saxophone in a band from the age of thirteen, a big band of sixty or so, and we went on tour to other European countries - France, Germany, Holland and places like that - and I saw life was different to home under communism. In school they taught us that these other European countries were persecuting their own people and everyone was miserable, so I asked why weren't we shooting Germans trying to cross the border to get into *our* beautiful country, instead of shooting our people trying to escape to Germany?

My point of view was noticed by the authorities and that was it. I took the exams and did well enough to get into university but I wasn't given a place. My father went to the headmaster of the school to ask why, and was told that it was because of my political views. The headmaster said he only had two years left before retiring and was not going to jeopardise his pension by supporting me. So I didn't go to university and did my military service instead.

During the first month you stayed in a training camp where they tried to drill your brain out from your head....on about the fifth day, feeling crazy and tired because of lack of sleep and food, and with idiots screaming at me all the time, a man in a nice uniform came around and asked me how I liked it there. I had only been in the army service for a few days and I didn't know what all the stripes on their uniforms meant. I said to him are you crazy? How can I like a place like this where idiots more stupid than me are giving me orders? He asked my name and said "I am the General and the boss of this mess here".

I thought I had just paved my way to the army criminal court, but on the contrary, he offered me a job as his driver. I took it and found out that he was a commander in the Czech Army and a friend of a Russian general called Pavlov who was the most powerful Russian in the Czech Republic.

They used to drink together very often. In the winter when the temperature outside was minus twenty his driver was waiting in the car in front of the house. In the Russian army a soldier couldn't even eat in the same room as a General or higher boss, it was very hierarchical. But my boss would not let me wait three days outside in the ice while they spent all this time drinking, so I was sleeping in the Russian general's bed. You know what, I even shared the bed with his wife- she was on one side and I was on the other. You don't believe me? It's true. She was ugly anyway.

One time I was to be given a weekend off, but first we had a visit from Raul Castro, Fidel's brother who was in charge of the Cuban army at the time. Raul was here to see our anti-tank guided missiles. So I drove him around, and he spoke very good Russian and was a nice guy. He was like a normal guy.

On the last day the visit took longer than planned and I realised I was going to miss my train to Prague and there would not be another one for days. Raul heard about this and said no problem we will drive you back to Prague so you can get the train to Zlin, which they did. It was amazing, they just drove up to the station and dropped me off like anyone would for a friend, while in the back was a Cuban guy with a briefcase of important documents handcuffed to his wrist.

After the revolution in 1989 I wanted to work, so I taught myself English. I never went to school to learn it.

I saw an advertisement by Marks & Spencer offering a training placement for managers from Eastern Europe. I applied just for fun. Six hundred people applied and they called twelve to Vienna for an interview with an M&S personnel manager who came over from London. They wanted two people but they took only me because they said no one else was what they expected.

### **Falling into wine**

I liked my time at M & S in Baker Street, I liked the English wine drinking culture and it gave me the idea to work with wine at home. So I went back and got the job as Export Manager at Vinium and I

met you and we had fun with that Australian winemaking project for a few years. You told me that one time you came with the Sainsbury's buyers to meet me in my hotel room and I was playing around with a girl and drinking beer, but I don't remember it.

### **Falling out of wine**

When the exports to the UK stopped I created a company selling car security devices. At first I got them from Taiwan but later we wanted to sell a better alarm made in Denmark. The Danish guys wanted to come and see our premises, but we didn't have any, we did everything in an old rented garage. A friend of mine selling VW cars had nice garages and workshops so we gave his guys our T-shirts to wear and took the Danes there and told them it was our premises. They were very happy and we made a deal and sold thousands of their alarms. Later we got a proper place and I told them about the trick. We did lots of good business together, but if I had not tricked them in the beginning we would never have got the contract.

This company vanished when car producers began to install alarms themselves. A guy I knew had just been elected Mayor of Zlin. He told me that if I have nothing better to do I can be General Secretary for the City Hall. He said he wanted someone to fight to make things better, which was bullshit, it was all just about bribes. It was a very good position to take bribes, but I never did.

Since the time I worked running the City Hall I have no more dreams or hopes about politics - they look good in jackets when you see them on TV or in the papers but 99% of them are totally stupid, achieve nothing, and are very sensitive to what they hear or read about themselves, regardless of whether it's true or not. I have never seen so many incompetent people together in one place as I saw every day in the Zlin City Hall.

I had lunch twice with President Havel, and a couple of times with Klaus, who became President later. I met many interesting people because I was the only one speaking foreign languages, so when foreign visitors came they always sent me to meet them and have dinner.

I did it for three and a half years because it was very complicated to quit without creating lots of enemies. It was a hard job for my nerves and natural fairness because nothing is fair there, nothing believe me. It was a terrible but valuable experience.

### **Into the jungle**

After this I was so exhausted that I took a job in Nicaragua, in the jungle, alone, trafficking money from the capital to distant places in the country where contractors needed to be paid in cash.

The City Hall had a friendship with some western European guys who commissioned building projects in Nicaragua. Nobody else from Zlin wanted to go as they were scared and did not speak the language. So I learnt Spanish and went.

The banking system didn't work in the countryside, so I took the money by foot. I tried to make myself like one of the alternative life style gringos that were around at the time- hippies, drug users etc. They didn't have much money and were not in much danger. I could have travelled by car or plane but it would make me look rich and I would be a target. So I travelled by horse, by bus with the local guys, on foot and by panga- their little boats on the river. It took two weeks to get from Managua to the contractors. For a few years I used to spend the winter in Nicaragua and go home in spring.

Those days the country was still in a kind of civil war so a white person with US\$60,000 in his backpack was a target for everyone - they sliced off heads for fifty bucks normally, so my backpack would be a fortune for them there. It was very dangerous but the majority were using Czech machine guns and they were not able to handle them properly, while I was very good at it. And they were very bad drinkers, so usually if I had a problem I would buy them drinks until they were drunk then I left.

Once I had dinner with President Aleman who promised me that we wouldn't need visas for Nicaragua anymore and the next day it happened -in countries without democracy things can

change very fast and effectively, and usually it's only one man who steals, here we have hundreds of them.

Good job, good time, lots of fun and lots of experience. It was relaxing compared to the stress of European life, the sun was shining every day and the nature was beautiful, even though sometimes you were literally under fire.”

### **Full circle**

Jan went on to create the Czech Republic's largest wine cork business and was recently featured in Forbes Magazine.

Every time someone I meet socially reacts to the news that I work in the wine business with “Oh I LOVE wine” my mind fills with images of Jan cutting his way through life's jungle, machete in hand. There is a lot more going on behind the scenes in the wine world than the average drinker would dream of. I was very glad Jan and I were on the same side. You wouldn't want him playing for the opposition.

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