

Mr. Bando, as usual

I think I can safely say that Maciej Bando and I are now friends.

We do not greet each other effusively or exchange confidences but we have built up a mutual respect over a long period of acquaintanceship. Ing.Bando - "specialist at the promotions office of the agency for foreign investment", as his business card proclaims - has watched me struggle for days on end in an attempt to open a shoe shop to see if the market economy really has arrived in Poland. I have been able to admire his sangfroid and, above all, his ubiquity. I found him sitting in one office on Wednesday, standing up in a different office on Thursday and leaning on a desk in a third office on Friday. Maciej Bando, specialist at the promotions office, is everywhere. He knows almost nothing at all, but he is everywhere.

I admire Ing. Bando because he manages to stay calm in the face of any unforeseen problem, provided it occurs during office hours, between 10am and 2pm. Wearing a brown suit and a light brown shirt, Bando the specialist has to keep Western businessmen in a good mood when they realize that the new bureaucracy's rules are being applied by the old bureaucracy's employees. Bando has to give them the list of investment opportunities but he also has to explain why Polish telephones, instead of working, cough, huff, puff, whistle and screech like sick children. He has to explain why the phones remain mute when it is raining and why it is almost impossible to call a number abroad even when it is not raining.

Of course, Maciej Bando cannot do all this but he does possess a disarming smile and an expression which is full of subtle Polish madness. He smiles when I tell him how I was cut off while I was telephoning the Ministry of Telecommunications to complain. He smiles when I show him a government publication of whose existence he is unaware ("How to do business in Poland", July 1990) where it says, "All those applying for a telephone will have one installed within four years". Even when I ask him "How do you think a foreign businessman can survive for four years without a telephone?" Bando the specialist looks at me calmly. His clear eyes say "I do not deal with telephones. I deal with investment".

Maciej Bando moves, as I have mentioned, around an unspecified number of offices inside a white building in Chopina Street, where extremely noisy building work is under way. This is the case in most Polish, Czech and Hungarian public offices. The building also houses an anti-trust office and was, until a few months ago, the seat of the Foreign Ministry.

At our first meeting, Bando gave me his card and sat back to hear my story. I said I was a lawyer working on behalf of some Italian clients who wanted to open a chain of shoe shops in Poland. "Since the Polish currency became convertible (9,500 zlotys to the dollar - ed.)", I explained with great seriousness, "there is a market here. Thirty eight million people all wanting a decent pair of shoes. Thirty eight million people with fifteen billion dollars tucked away, or at least that's what it says on page 54 of your brochure".

"Today, a pair of winter shoes", says ing.Bando, who is now showing great interest, "costs 350,000 zlotys" - the equivalent of 44,000 lire or about twenty pounds.

"My clients", I continue, "can offer interesting products at that price. Perhaps they will not be the latest thing in fashion but they will still be Italian products. They would like to open a shop here in Warsaw and, in the future, others in Danzig, Cracow and Katowice. What do they have to do?"

At this question, the question of a typical, impatient Westerner, the foreigner who takes revolutions at face value, ing.Bando heaves a sigh. Then, he suggests a meeting with Onufry Czeslaw Szpaczynski, whose business card does not say "specialist" but "expert", corrected to "expert" in biro.

There are four people waiting outside the office for an audience. These are the new Polish businessmen, the interpreter explains, true sons of post-Communism. They may be recognized by the simulated leather attache cases which they carry everywhere, at all hours of the day and night. Nobody knows what the cases contain.

When it is my turn, I am called in. Szpaczynski the expert looks at peace with the world and lets it be understood that not even an Italian shoe salesman is going to ruin his day.

"We are interested in productive investments", he says, "while you are proposing a commercial activity. You should go to the Ministry of International Economic Relations but I must warn you straight away that in order to be granted a licence, your investment will have to be in excess of fifty thousand dollars.

If you are still interested, to find a Polish partner, please apply to the promotions office next door". In the promotions office is Maciej Bando. Szpaczynski does not say so, but I know so.

Escorted by the interpreter, who is happy to be contributing to the arrival of Italian shoes in Warsaw, I leave the investment agency, the ex-Foreign Ministry, and come to the Ministry for International Economic Relations, the ex-Ministry of Foreign Trade, passing the future Stock Exchange, the ex-headquarters of the Communist Party. On the fourth floor, legal section, room 468, there is a notice board with five seats in front of it. A small crowd, cowed by a sign which warns "Do not ask us for the information displayed here", is diligently copying everything into notebooks or onto sheets of paper.

A thirtysomething in a check jacket leads me into a microscopic office perched perilously over the courtyard. He explains, "To be able to open your shops, you must invest at least one million dollars over two years. That, however, is not the business of this office. You must go to the Agencja Do Spraw (d/s) Inwestycji, the Agency for Foreign Investment, at number one, Chopina Street. You will find ing.Bando there". "I know", I tell him.

The great Bando is sitting, serene and impassive, waiting for me in the room where yesterday Mr.Szpaczynski was receiving visitors. I explain that, at the

Ministry of Foreign Trade, they are asking for one million dollars and not fifty thousand. He looks genuinely surprised. "A million ?" he asks. "A million", I repeat. "Strange", he opines. "Bizarre", I concur.

On his advice, I go for information to the shop with the Benetton sign in Marszalkowska Street, in the shadow of the lugubrious Palace of Culture (a gift of the Soviet Union). The deputy manageress seems happy to see me. She wants to complain because "Benetton send us seconds from all over the world". When I ask for help with my shoe shop, she smiles. "You must avoid two errors. First of all, take everything they tell you in the ministries with a pinch of salt. There are still many loopholes in the legislation, thankfully, and a shopkeeper can still get by. Then also remember - never try to sell suede shoes in Poland".

I promise to steer clear of suede shoes ("It's always raining", says the lady, "and that's fatal for that kind of shoe"). I bypass the ministries and go back to the Investment Agency at number one, Chopina Street. Mr.Bando, tucked away in another office, is waiting for me. I ask him to select from his computerized archives a Polish entrepreneur in the shoe sector, private or state, and to arrange an appointment. Bando smiles as if he had just heard a reasonable request. "Come back tomorrow at ten", he commands, "You shall have what you ask".

The following day - after visiting the Fundacja Polska (Polish Foundation) where they ask for seven million lire (over 3,000 pounds) plus expenses to help me open my shop - I go back to Maciej Bando who, oddly, is not smiling. "I didn't manage to arrange your appointment with Mr.Andrzej Konopczynski of the Damar company", he sighs. "The telephone wasn't working. Go and take a look anyway. Perhaps you'll find someone".

Dutifully, I take a taxi to the working-class Wola district in the western suburbs of Warsaw. Damar is situated along a sort of motocross track which the locals insist on calling Okretova Street. Damar is shut. Krawiectwo Konfekcyjne, which produces "sartorial confections", is however open. The workers there have no idea who the owner of Damar is but they do know that an old Mercedes is normally parked in the yard. That is a sign that another "entrepreneur" lives in the area. When this gentleman arrives, he suggest I go into business with his cousin, since Damar has closed. He will get the cousin to call me at my hotel. I stay in Warsaw for a further three days but the cousin does not call. I blame it on the phones.