

# East Meets West

## Women Entrepreneurs Helping Women in Slovenia

by *Andrina G. Lever*

*Pendant la période d'euphorie qui a suivi l'effondrement du communisme, les gouvernements, les agences et les consultants occidentaux se sont précipités vers les anciens pays de l'Europe centrale et de l'Europe de l'est pour enseigner aux gens un style*

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*de gestion occidentale. Cet article examine l'un de ces récents programmes destinés aux femmes d'affaires de la Slovanie.*

In the Communism of Eastern and Central Europe, women were constitutionally assured equal rights with men. In reality, though, while they may have been highly educated, they were rarely allowed to occupy decision making positions. In a recent national report prepared by the Office for Women's Politics of Slovenia for the 4th World Conference on Women to be held in Beijing in 1995, it is stated that:

In terms of professional training, the proportion of employed women is greater than that of men, where employees with higher, secondary and primary education are concerned, while it is somewhat smaller in the case of university level occupational training. Nevertheless, very few administrative and managerial posts are filled by women, despite their education and the consequent fulfillment of the formal conditions for vertical mobility. (3)

Although women make up more than 50 per cent of the work force in Slovenia, the discrimination against them is monumental and they hold very few senior positions. With the fall of Communism and the conversion to a free market economy many industries are being rationalized<sup>1</sup> and jobs eliminated. Women are the first to be let go. As in the West, many of these industries and jobs will not return. This has created an interesting phenomenon. Forced to work under the Communists, many women feel that their lives or children were "stolen" from them and they now want the luxury of staying at home to be mothers and wives, like many believe all women in the West have been able to do. The reality is, however, that the conver-

sion to the free market economy has brought with it the problems of inflation and competition and now, more than ever, the need for more than one income to maintain a family. Rather than the traditional "Women in Development" programs that have been implemented in developing countries in the past, the countries of Eastern and Central Europe have chosen to focus on programs for "Women in Transition." These programs give support and training to women contemplating self employment and entrepreneurship as a viable alternative to traditional employment.

In June 1994, I was one of three women entrepreneurs from three different countries asked to design and deliver a two day workshop for "Women in the World of Business" in Bled, Slovenia. The invitation arose out of contacts made at an international conference for women entrepreneurs held in London, England the previous year. The Slovenian program focused on women making the transition from senior management positions (directors) to entrepreneurs and self employment. Its aim was to prepare women in advance for privatization and the real possibility that they would be the first to lose their jobs.

This program was truly unique for several reasons. It was the first collaboration of women entrepreneurs from three countries—Canada, England, and Scotland—to deliver a seminar and workshop to women from a fourth country—Slovenia. It was the first program specifically created and delivered by women entrepreneurs—not academics—for women in business. The idea was to speak from the voice of experience rather than to teach theories and management styles. The seminar also provided the opportunity to develop *real* trading ties and mentoring relationships with the women participants. Furthermore, instead of creating a workshop based on a case study, a real project was developed which will ultimately create a fund to assist future women entrepreneurs in Slovenia.

In my experience of working with women in business all over the world, several interesting factors remain constant. One of the most significant is that all over the world, women who seek to become business women or to become self employed face the same challenges—challenges, never problems. These challenges can be overcome. The *degree* to which they exist varies from country to country, and according to economic, cultural, social, and personal situations, but the challenges that exist are, nevertheless, the same: identifying skills and opportunities, obtaining funding, establishing credibility, balancing careers and family life, finding sufficient support systems both in the home and outside of the home, and coping with discrimination. It is not uncommon that successful women entrepreneurs do not set out to be entrepreneurs, but rather find

themselves in a position where they have no other choice—their jobs have been eliminated, there are no other jobs available, they have to earn a living while caring for children at home, or they have to take over a family business. Sometimes they have to become self employed simply because they need to support themselves or their families and there are no other opportunities available.

The program in Slovenia was a joint venture between the Slovenian Government and an independent private foundation funded by major Slovenian corporations. They hoped to bring together Slovenian women in transition with women entrepreneurs from the West, in order to learn from them, to develop relationships with them, and to share ideas and experiences. There is no question that there is a need for training for women in the Central and Eastern European countries. However, we who have been fortunate enough to participate in such programs must be aware at all times that we are dealing not with *un-*

*developed* nations, but with *misdeveloped* nations. Most of the people that we have worked with are highly educated and very proud and we must honour and respect that at all times. The Slovenian participants in this two day seminar and workshop were senior managers of major companies in the process of being privatized. They were bank managers, politicians, professional women in private practices, and women who had already started their own businesses.

The potential of cooperative training programs such as this one is great if we remember that we are working in cooperation with our host countries and that we are there to build relationships. We must be prepared to share what we know and allow it to be adapted to the specific culture or host country we are working with.

The aims of this particular conference were, first, to tell women executives things that textbooks do not say. All of the participants could easily understand the principles of marketing and western business management but they had no practical experience and wanted to hear from 'doers' not 'talkers'. Second, the goal was to provide women with the opportunity to forge tangible links with western business women so that they could telephone or write when a problem arose and their mentor could help. Further, we wanted to show top Government Ministers

that many women successfully run businesses from the top as there is not just a glass ceiling in Slovenia but a concrete one! Finally, the aim was to create a high profile event at which the first Slovenian translation of *Business Amazons*, a western book on women entrepreneurs in England and the United States written by Leah Hertz, could be launched.

During our brief stay in Slovenia we met with many women in positions of authority: company directors, two "women directors of the year," politicians, academics, professional women, and business women. All were eager to learn. After the breakup of Yugoslavia and the outbreak

of war in Bosnia, Slovenia lost 60 per cent to 70 per cent of its export market overnight. It has been struggling ever since to replace that market with other international markets. Tours of factories showed sadly under-utilized state-of-the-art facilities. We met women running a large textile factory, a large cosmetic factory manufacturing western products under license, a

knitting factory, and a jewellery factory. All were concerned for the future of their companies as well as for their jobs as a result of privatization. All were eager to participate in round table discussions and learn how we manage our 'challenges' in business and at home. It is also important to understand that many of these women were truly unique in the positions they held. Many Slovenian women are under-employed and have not been allowed to achieve such senior roles.

During the two day seminar and workshop emphasis was placed on identifying skills and opportunities, developing business plans, the need for marketing and market research at all levels, and teamwork. We examined opportunities that might arise as a result of privatization. We discussed the need for products and support services. Since the seminar and workshops were being conducted by three highly successful women entrepreneurs who built up their own companies in different countries and all do business internationally, we were able to share our backgrounds and draw on our own experiences, including our mistakes. The participants identified with this perspective. We were able to challenge tried-and-true ways, and be challenged in our turn.

Workshops were developed to demonstrate how an idea



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is taken from a conceptual stage through development and management to reality. Different management tasks were assigned and teamwork was emphasized. This was particularly valuable since the participants had previously worked in environments where teamwork was not encouraged. At the end of the two days, the participating group was left with a viable working project that could create a self-funding venture capital pool to help finance women in business without government involvement. The benefits of the project, if realized, would be:

- to demonstrate that Slovenian business women can work together and run a successful private business;
- to put back to work under-utilized factory capabilities<sup>2</sup> which would enable such a project to be developed and implemented;
- to provide employment;
- to promote Slovenian tourism;
- to assist in economic development;
- to create an outlet for products for companies already run by women entrepreneurs;
- to promote women;
- to create proceeds that would go to help women;
- to create opportunities for Slovenian women to make contact with business women from around the world;
- to promote exports, imports, and joint ventures;
- to help women participants develop the following skills: team building, delegation, management of many different functions, marketing, corporate relations and sponsorship, benefits and sharing, problem solving, logistics, budgets—responsibility for profit and loss, and accountability.

The project is now in the preliminary stages of imple-

mentation. It was so well received that in a private meeting, the Prime Minister of Slovenia pledged his personal support and the support of the Government of Slovenia to ensure its success.

As a result of this project I was invited to deliver another paper at the 24th European Small Business Seminar, also held in Bled, Slovenia in September of this year. The perspective that successful women entrepreneurs bring to these business forums is personal and unique. It involves more than creating role models. It involves shaping new ways of starting and managing businesses. Although Slovenia is a small country, the importance of such programs cannot and should not be underestimated. The true purpose of such undertakings is to create ongoing relationships, develop trade, and encourage women to become self sufficient wherever they are. Women are helping women, and in business this is a critical issue. Also, what must never be taken for granted is how much these programs are a two way street—we learn as much as we teach.

*Andrina G. Lever, a lawyer, has been the President of Lever Enterprises since 1988, a company which specializes in assisting small and mid-market companies with respect to management restructuring, finance, and international commercial development. She co-founded Expansion International Advisory Inc. in 1992 to assist Canadian companies expanding outside of Canada and to present training seminars on business and business management. She is also co-founder of JIT International, a UK based consulting firm specializing in entrepreneurial training programs in Europe. As a Vice President of Women Entrepreneurs of Canada, she is continually involved in the development of programs to foster women's entrepreneurship and in monitoring activity in this sector.*



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<sup>1</sup>Under Communism, efficiency and competition were not priorities. The priority was to keep people working. Therefore, many industries and factories inefficiently and uncompetitively duplicated products and services. With the conversion to a free market economy and open competition, these industries and facilities are being combined, condensed, down-sized, and sometimes totally eliminated. This rationalization and stream lining of business in order to focus on competition and profitability has resulted in the elimination of many jobs.

<sup>2</sup> Many facilities in Slovenia are under-utilized, especially since the break up of the former Yugoslavia which resulted in the loss of Slovenia's primary trading partner. This project would create opportunities for designing, manufacturing, and marketing products thus putting back to work under-utilized factory capabilities.

### References

Office for Women's Politics. *Status of Women in Slovenia.* Republic of Slovenia, 1994.