

Flying High

Jan Borowski, president of J.B. Investments, a company that is the exclusive Polish representative of aircraft producers Bell Helicopter Corp., Piper Aircraft Inc., Diamond Aircraft Industries GmbH, and Aviat Aircraft Inc., talks to Zofia Szelińska.

■ People call you a visionary...

They might have a point. In 1977, I came up with the idea to bring the Mercedes company to Poland. Many told me to give it up, saying the representative office would be a total flop. After all, who drove a Mercedes in Poland back then? A few ambassadors maybe. But I knew better. In the 1980s, after Poland had introduced gas ration coupons, Mercedes cars with diesel engines became a hit on the market, as diesel fuel was much easier to come by.

■ You did not exactly make a fortune on the airplane business at first.

I didn't, but I was consistent and confident that this democratic country with a population of 38 million was bound to catch up with the rest of Europe and Western standards. In 1997, when a lot of people still could not even afford a car in Poland, I became a representative for Piper Aircraft Inc. and thus a pioneer in professional aircraft sales here. Quite obviously, it was a money-losing business. I hired an accountant part-time and over 10 years I only managed to sell nine airplanes. In 2006, sales soared to an annual record of five planes and for the first time my profit from planes equaled what I was making on trading in Mercedes cars. It came as quite a shock and was a turning point in my business on wings. I decided to get rid of the company with which my name is associated to this day, and devoted myself to airplanes completely. The move paid off; in 2007 we had a delightful financial result when we sold 20 aircraft, including 10 Pipers, which put us ahead of the Germans and French. And now I have a problem: How do I do it again? This year through August, we sold 16 planes. Any attempt to repeat a success like that is a challenge. It is difficult, but not hopeless. This market is pretty limited and those who might want to buy a plane already have. Thankfully, pilots keep refining their skills and so they try more technologically advanced aircraft. I have a few customers determined to make another purchase.



I sell American Pipers, Austrian Diamonds and helicopters. Since last December, I have been an independent representative for Bell Helicopter Corporation.

■ Do you have competition?

Cessna. They too had a very good 2007 and now they are debating how to match that result. Then, there is Cirrus. They have taken off this year to a lot of media hype.

■ Growing sales must be hard to maintain in this business. After all, airplanes are a luxury commodity in every sense—in terms of price, technology and design. Isn't this market a very small one?

It is, but let us take Spain. They have 40 million citizens, while Poland has 38 million. There are 3,000 private planes registered in Spain and only 630 in Poland, so the prospects for the market to grow are enormous.

■ I have to ask this question: why would anyone need a plane? Is it about prestige, self-esteem, social status?

It is more about a sense of freedom, as in, I can do anything, I live in Europe, and there are no national borders for me. Ever since Poland entered the Schengen area, I can take off from my grass-covered airstrip in Konstancin near Warsaw and three hours later I touch down on the tiny island of Lido, where I board a motorboat at 3 euros per ticket and a moment later I am on the Canale Grande in Venice! It only takes me an hour and 20 minutes to get to Jastarnia on the Polish sea coast and just 40 minutes more to reach the Danish island of Bornholm. I land on a meadow, a blanket and vacuum bottle under my arm. Pure bliss!

WINGS OF HISTORY

Jan Borowski takes a keen interest in aviation history. He is the head of the Zabytki Polskiego Nieba (History of Polish Skies) Foundation that renovates vintage aircraft. So far, he has restored two Ts-8 Bies airplanes and his next challenge is a PZL P-IIc. An identical plane was flown by Borowski's uncle—who graduated from the Eaglets School in Dęblin, eastern Poland, in 1936 as top gun—when he shot down a German Messerschmitt 109 in a dogfight over Warsaw in September 1939, soon after the outbreak of World War II. To Borowski, a museum piece only makes sense when he can fly it.

Private planes have also become an indispensable tool in business. When you have your head office in Cracow and are building a factory in Suwałki in northeastern Poland, a plane is not a luxury anymore. You simply need one to run your company efficiently. Have a look at this photo: a traffic jam below, and a plane above. I had it captioned *Lepsi góra* (Best Above the Rest).

■ How much does it cost to own a plane?

Renting a hangar costs around zł1,500 a month, which is not more than keeping a horse in a good stable. The maintenance costs, checks and repairs come to around zł10,000 per year. You would have to spend the same amount on a company limo. Aircraft fuel costs less than zł4 per liter.

■ What about the plane itself?

The price of light aircraft range from \$200,000 to \$2 million, and helicopters cost anywhere between \$500,000 and \$5 million.