Bohemian glassworks: An old industry in modern times

Gail Schoettler

Presentation by Mr. Jaroslav Marsal, sales manager for the domestic market in the Czech Republic. Article information from Gail Schoettler.

Visit the Bohemian Glassworks Factory and you might find yourself in a time warp, for both the glass making industry and the village of Skalice, where the factory is located, are right out of a medieval past.

The factory itself is of the 20th century, but it is steeped in the ancient Czech discipline of crystal and art glass manufacture. Bohemian Glassworks is now challenged to bring factory equipment and methods into the 21st century and comply with environmental standards that didn’t exist when glass makers first started plying their trade.

“The factory is not mechanized,” says Gail Schoettler. “There are no moving belts to convey things from one part of the factory to another during the manufacturing process.” Humans do the legwork.

While at the factory, Schoettler says she observed how a worker carried two candlesticks from the forms to the cooling ovens over 30 feet away each time the candlesticks were released.

The company is introducing modern techniques into the factory. Ten years ago, the ratio of hand-to-machine-produced crystal was 60/40. Today it is 20/80, and the volume of production is two times what it was 10 years ago. Not everything lends itself to machine production. Some products, with special shapes, can only be made by hand.

Bohemian Glassworks is a well-known brand globally. Ninety percent of its production is exported to 60 countries; the United States and Canada are the largest markets. The company is flexible in responding to the market and modifies its products according to their destination. The Japanese, for example, like very decorative, traditional products and Europeans prefer simpler designs.

“The market for crystal and hand-blown glass is very different today,” says Schoettler. “This used to be an art form; today these products are a commodity.”

Under Communism, only one company in a category was allowed to export, and that was Ceska, Bohemian’s predecessor. Ceska had contracts with retailers to make products branded with their store names and Bohemian has continued this practice. In the US, Bohemian products are sold under brand names such as Neiman Marcus.

Privatized in 1993, Bohemian Glassworks is part of Porcela Plus, a large holding company engaged in the manufacture of crystal, glass, porcelain and heat-resistant glass.

Eight hundred workers make the factory hum, each one earning on average $500 per month. Employees pay health and social insurance taxes, and the company pays a payroll tax, part of which goes to employee health care. Salaries are much lower than in the 15 original member states of the European Union; living standards are also lower.

Despite high unemployment, Bohemian has difficulty finding workers with the technical and engineering skills necessary for operating modern machinery. So the company has established its own training school which can turn out qualified candidates in a three-year program.
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There are hazards associated with glass making. Both hand-blown and machine cut crystal are leaded, and lead is dangerous, Schoettler points out. Consequently, workers receive medical examinations every six months.

“The Czech Republic has laws regarding contamination, and the company makes a major effort to comply with those laws,” says Schoettler. “The European Union standards will now prevail and they are stricter than what has been in effect until now.” This shouldn’t be a problem because the company, which was privatized a number of years ago, is totally prepared to meet EU rules and regulations.

There are other problems, however. “Safety standards in the factory are very poor,” says Schoettler, recalling how workers blowing hot glass passed the nearly molten glass over the heads and shoulders of people working close by. “If any of the hot glass had fallen off the blowing tubes, it would have badly burned those workers. On top of that, the factory is very dark, making it difficult to see what you’re doing.”

Storage facilities are also poor. “Huge quantities of product are stored outside on plastic-wrapped trays. They are open to weather, traffic, theft and vandalism.”