

INTERNATIONAL
PERSON
OF THE YEAR



John Lynch

LYNKA



By Michele Bell

John Lynch had one hell of a 2021.

He sold the majority ownership in his business – Krakow, Poland-based Lynka, Europe's leading and award-winning decorator of promo apparel – to his old pal Ira Neaman, owner of Counselor Top 40 supplier Vantage Apparel (asi/93390). He launched Lynka's Print-on-Demand business in Europe. And he finally published a novel, *The Ark*, that he'd been toying with for years – a work of fiction about corporate espionage and intrigue that topped the best-seller list in Poland.

Now that the merger of Lynka and Vantage was complete, Lynch couldn't have been more delighted. The melding was completely synchronous. Not only are they both the best of the best when it comes to apparel decoration, but they're also Garden State natives – Neaman grew up in Pittsburgh but has been a Jersey transplant for decades, while Lynch grew up in North Jersey and went to high school with Jon Bon Jovi. The Jersey jersey guys, if you will.

Lynch was proud of the business he built, as Lynka has world-class printing, logistics and manufacturing operations with over 300 employees in a

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100,000+-square-foot facility. With sales of approximately €25 million (\$26 million USD) in a network of 5,000 reseller clients across 25 EU nations, he would also now have access to Vantage's vast apparel offerings and its devoted North American client base. Additionally, he was expanding his professional pursuits fur-

ther – trying his hand at public speaking at TEDx conferences, remaining heavily involved with his YPO (Young Presidents' Organization) activities, and serving as treasurer for the American Chamber of Commerce in Poland (AmCham Poland).

The first quarter of this year, too, was shaping up to be a strong one

for Lynka, as sales were robust and the effects of COVID on the economy and the promo marketplace were beginning to subside as events were rebounding. With his wife and two high school-aged kids with him in Poland, Lynch was a happy man.

And then February 24 occurred – the day Russia invaded the sov-



ereign nation of Ukraine. The war has completely upended Eastern Europe, global economies, livelihoods, the world order ... and John Lynch's mission in life.

A Witness to War

Because Krakow is two hours from the Ukrainian border, Lynch felt an immediate and visceral need to get involved and do something, anything. And because he's not only a deeply decent guy, but a die-hard, can-do entrepreneur who started Lynka 30 years ago just as Communism was falling in Poland, he knew just how hard this fight would be for the Ukrainian people and how much help they would need.

But Lynch, ever the scrappy, industrious Jersey guy, mobilized fast. He knew he'd need to make room to hire refugees at Lynka, ultimately taking in more than 50 additional workers and training them on Lynka's machines. He and his 17-year-old son, Jake, would drive back and forth to the border on the weekends, picking up refugees – often Ukrainian mothers with their children and pets – to take them to shelters and the homes of

Polish citizens. To date, a staggering 3.5 million Ukrainian refugees have fled to Poland, a country of just under 40 million people.

Knowing that the country's limited resources would be stretched thin, Lynch and other members of Poland's governmental and business groups like the Chamber of Commerce took ownership of a vacant dormitory, got construction workers, electricians and plumbers onsite quickly to make the building livable and welcoming for refugees. They also added an area where the children could go to school, play, do arts and crafts and where adults could learn English as a second language – with Lynch's son offering to tutor.

"The Ukrainian people come here to Poland with nothing – the clothes on their backs and often one suitcase, holding their children and looking for help in a country they don't know, where they're often alone," Lynch says. "How can you see this happening at your border and not help? And the Polish people have stepped up

Photos of the refurbished dormitory in Grabie, Poland, with clean, safe apartments given to Ukrainian refugees who'd just arrived over the border, in many cases sleeping on real beds – paid for by Lynka and Vantage – for the first time in days. Lynch and his colleagues in Poland not only set up the facility, but dedicated space for a school and an arts & crafts area for the children. Here's Lynch with Martina (below, in white jacket and green hat), a graphic designer and one of the first refugees that Lynch helped, and a T-shirt designed and printed at Lynka, to raise money for refugees. "All the Ukrainian moms wanted one," Lynch says.





in ways that are nothing short of inspiring.”

But with heart and vision as robust as his ability to rally and organize, Lynch knew more needed to be done, on a bigger scale. And that’s when he conceived and launched Corporate Aid for Ukraine (CAU), a rapid response, front-line charitable organization created to raise funds from U.S. businesses for the explicit purpose of providing immediate humanitarian aid to Ukrainians, both in-country and refugees in Poland. “We’ve received donations from hundreds of U.S. companies and individuals ranging from \$100 to tens of thousands of dollars,” Lynch reports. “All told, in this first phase, our goal was to raise \$1 million and we’re well on our way toward our goal of raising \$5 million. And we’ve enjoyed wonderful donations and encouragement from the promotional products industry – in the USA and EU – and look forward to continued financial support.”

Lynch points out that CAU and AmCham Poland are in a unique position to help the Ukrainian people, as there is a massive and unprecedented need for humanitarian aid. Large and small businesses as well as individual donors are an important source of funding for this urgently needed front-line aid. “My CAU co-founders and I have decades of experience and are well-connected

with Polish government, institutions and businesses, plus strong contacts within Ukraine,” Lynch says. “We can get things done here near the front line. The CAU advisory board and AmCham Poland is monitoring the evolving situation and we’re responding promptly to the emerging needs and rapidly evolving challenges as this crisis continues to develop. Sixty-two percent of Ukrainian refugees are in Poland – it’s just heartbreaking.”

Jonathan Isaacson, the chairman & CEO of Counselor Top 40 supplier Gemline (asi/56070) and the 2021 Counselor Person of the Year, has known Lynch for years and isn’t the least bit surprised by what he’s done on behalf of Ukrainian refugees in Poland. “John’s work on the Ukraine humanitarian project is quintessential John,” Isaacson says. “He saw a problem that needed to be solved and quietly worked to provide a solution – all at no benefit to himself. He put in untold hours, without fanfare, and without seeking any credit. He did an amazing job, and, as he always does, did it with a smile and an easy laugh. There aren’t a lot of people we would trust to distribute our charitable dollars, especially in a crisis like this. With John Lynch, we sent him a \$25,000 donation, and have complete confidence that the organization he put together will put it to good use.”



Vantage owner and President Ira Neaman, shown here with John Lynch, in a photo taken to commemorate the melding of their respective businesses – Vantage being the top apparel decorator in the U.S. and Lynka being the top apparel decorator in Europe – when Vantage acquired the majority share of Lynka last July.

Taking the Good With the Bad

The irony of 2022, of course, is how well countries across the world were rebounding after two-plus years of COVID shutdowns. “Last year finished robustly – most EU companies I know had a strong Q4 2021, but honestly, none of us knew what to expect in 2022,” Lynch says. “After January and early February, we could see that the positive trend was continuing into the new year. Then Russian troops began to amass on Ukraine’s border, and a full-scale invasion began. We braced for another drastic COVID-like effect, but that hasn’t happened. Across Europe, business has held up well, with many of the same problems facing the U.S. promo industry – supply chain challenges, stock shortages, labor shortages, and most recently, wildly high inflation.”

An entrepreneur at his core, Lynch has a degree in mechanical engineering from Lehigh University and an MBA from Wharton of the University of Pennsylvania. When he emigrated from New Jersey to Krakow, Poland 30 years ago and started an apparel decoration business just as Communism was being dismantled under the inspirational, Zelenskyy-like leadership of former President of Poland Lech Walesa, Lynch’s family and friends back in Jersey thought he was “effing nuts.” But with Poland desperate for an influx of entrepreneurs to rebuild its economy, Lynch thought it was a great opportunity for a young, hungry go-getter. He chose apparel decoration because he thought it would be “easy.” Still, what did he know about starting a business in an Eastern European country that

was until very recently oppressed by Russia with a local economy in tatters? After all, he barely spoke the language and knew no one to help him network, navigate local customs or business protocols.

“All of that is true,” laughs Lynka, who is now fluent in Polish. “The company turned 30 years old this year and since I first founded it way back in 1992, I’ve had a range of partners and shareholders from private individuals to private equity and even family wealth funds. But nothing in those years compares to our relationship with Vantage, which is phenomenal – a classic win-win, one-plus-one equals three type of thing. Since we were introduced 15 years ago, Ira and I have kept in touch regularly, where we compared notes, and even visited each other’s companies over the years. We often joked that Vantage and

To donate to Corporate Aid for Ukraine, visit: amcham.pl/corporate-aid-ukraine

Lynka are so similar in so many ways ranging from business model, values and corporate culture – and even the large number of Polish staff. Whenever we talked about our current challenges and opportunities, most of the time, they were the same. So when the opportunity came for me to buy out my previous shareholders, the first company I called was Vantage.”

Lynch acknowledges that he’s never had a better partner than Vantage and Neaman. “An industry legend, a great entrepreneur, an insightful and supportive partner, and a great friend – Ira is all of those things,” he says. “As Van-

tage is one of the leading embroidery houses in the world, we’re learning lots of tips and tricks in that area. And finally, by the time this goes to press, Lynka will have begun our launch of Vantage brand apparel in the European market. But probably the most value-added for me personally is my standing Sunday afternoon pow-wow with Ira. Every weekend, we jump on Zoom and chat for about an hour – usually without a specific agenda. It’s just great for me to have someone like Ira to discuss various topics, whether it’s our fundraising efforts to help Ukraine, what’s happening on the labor market, or how to increase our embroidery efficiency. Basically, I moved to Poland only to realize that my perfect

partner was another Jersey guy.”

Neaman is quick to point out how much he admires his new business partner and old friend. “From going to Poland to help build a new society based on economic freedom in the late ’80s, to answering the call today of the Ukrainian people as they fight back against an invasion of their country, to hiring refugees, providing housing for the mothers and their children whose husbands were fighting the war in Ukraine and picking up refugees at the border, John is like a modern-day Schindler for the Ukrainian people,” Neaman says. “It’s John’s warmth and compassion for others coupled with his business savvy that drew me to him.”



TAKING HIS MESSAGE TO A GLOBAL STAGE

This past May, John Lynch co-produced and appeared on CNN’s “Smerconish” show, which broadcast from Warsaw to cover the heroic Polish people taking in Ukrainian refugees fleeing war into their homes. “The support the Polish people have shown to Ukrainian refugees is one of the greatest shows of humanity in history,” Lynch says.

The Measure of One Man’s Life

If you’re looking for proof – in these challenging, emotionally fraught times when it’s so easy to be cynical – that one man can have a huge impact on the lives of others, consider Lynch’s trajectory since decamping to Krakow 30 years ago. In 2014, he was awarded the highest civilian honor in Poland, the Presidential Order of the Gold Cross from the President of Poland, for his contributions to building the country’s free market economy during the past 25 years.

That’s just one entry in his long list of accolades. He was also voted Central & Eastern Europe’s CEO of the Year, is the former Entrepreneur of the Year in Poland, and

was named one of the 10 American Pioneers who made the most profound contributions to the successful transformation of Poland. He’s former Chairman of YPO Poland, and has been treasurer and board member of the American Chamber of Commerce since 2003.

Lynch is quick to say, though, all of that pales in comparison to his continued quest in working with his fellow citizens of Poland – who’ve stepped up so bravely and compassionately, in so many ways – to ease the burden on the people of Ukraine who need help. “As much as I remain a deeply patriotic American and U.S. citizen, I think it’s unlikely I would relocate back to the U.S.,” Lynch says. “I’m very settled in

Poland, love living in Europe with easy access to so many countries and cultures, as does my family. There’s a good chance my kids will go to college in the U.S., so I suspect we will spend more time over there in the coming years. On the other hand, Poland was never a part of my ‘life-plan’ when I moved here in 1991. But here I am.” And Lynch’s parting words, so apt for someone with his indomitable spirit, with which he signs every email? They’re courtesy of a song title from his old high school pal, Jon Bon Jovi: “Keep the faith.”

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