



Three Things that Last Forever

International Leadership
Institute

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CHAPTER THREE: Just another coincidence

In 1991, when Knut and Gudrun set off for a weekend of planning and praying at Jekyll Island, they were convinced, as were many of their Christian friends and colleagues, that God was calling them to help the people of Czechoslovakia to rebuild their devastated economy. The Petersons knew they wanted to find innovative ways to use their business, the International Leadership Institute (ILI), to help leaders in the newly-free Czechoslovakia in their efforts to build a strong market economy in the context of a democratic society. Such an effort would help Czechoslovakia to develop gradually into a country which could eventually rejoin the rest of Europe and become part of the European Union. During that weekend they prayed fervently for God to reveal His will. But even so, they weren't really prepared for how quickly and decisively God would act, through a long string of seeming "coincidences."

Just four days later Knut, who worked in a small Christian college on the top of Lookout Mountain, Georgia, received permission from the college's president to establish, launch, and deliver the "Executive Education Program for Czechoslovak Business Leaders." Knut and Gudrun thought at the time that it was a coincidence that they had received the green light on this project, which facilitated the later development of the International Leadership Institute's major business leadership development program (*Business Leadership Forum: USA*).

In 1992 Knut and Gudrun returned to Jekyll Island and prayed that God would make it possible for them to find the right partners to work with, while providing them with influential people willing to support the new program.

The day after they returned from Jekyll Island, Knut received a call from Tennessee Senator Al Gore's office, relaying the message that the senator was willing to help in with the proposed program in any way he could. Senator Gore offered to write to the current U.S. Ambassador in Prague, Shirley Temple Black, about the establishment of the program, and to ask for her support.



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Three Things that Last Forever
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Servant Leaders Press
International Leadership Institute Publishing House
830-13 A1A North, #317
Ponte Vedra, FL, 32082
USA
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Executive Education Program for Czechoslovak Business Leaders (EEP-CBL)

What followed soon thereafter was the signing of a contract in which all the U.S. program partners (the World Trade Center Chattanooga, Knut's college and the International Leadership Institute, the Peterson's company) agreed to support the programs for an initial period of one year.



Prague, 1993: signing the agreement with the International Leadership Institute, the Czechoslovak government, and the Jacksonville Chamber of Commerce to deliver the Executive Education Programs for Czechoslovak Business Leaders

At the same time, Knut received a letter from the Czechoslovak Ministry of Industry and Trade offering to facilitate the project on the Czechoslovak side by selecting groups of participating leaders with the assistance of the Olomouc Training Centre (in the Moravian city of Olomouc, Czechoslovakia) and providing financial support for the program participants. Again Knut and Gudrun said: "What a coincidence that all this should happen just after we prayed about it!"



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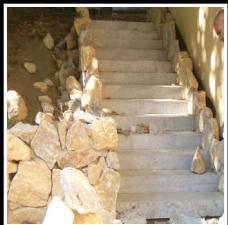
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After the signing of the contracts came the delivery phase of the *Executive Education Program for Czechoslovak Business Leaders*.

Groups of twelve Czechoslovak business leaders arrived in the U.S. at three-month intervals for the program, which lasted three months and included classroom seminars, cultural experiences

and an intensive business internship in an American-based firm that matched as closely as possible the industry of the Central European executive participant.



"Gudrun" and "Knut" at the Czechoslovak Ministry of Industry and Trade, partners in the EEP-CBL programs

Each participant needed a matching U.S. business internship sponsor; for example, if a participant came from the Czechoslovak nuclear industry he needed an internship in the U.S. in that industry. As Knut and Gudrun prayed about the right matches between the visiting business leaders and the local U.S. businesses, they again encountered "coincidence after coincidence"! The matches resulted in nearly ideal relationships: for example, in the case of visiting Czech executive Pavel Sotola from the Temelin nuclear plant, Knut was able to match him with executives at the nuclear division of the Westinghouse Electric Corporation; this match later resulted in a multi-million dollar contract for Westinghouse to upgrade the Czechoslovak plant, while establishing relevant up-to-date safety procedures and measures.

The Petersons spent a great deal of time praying for the continued success of the programs of the International Leadership Institute, for their partners in these programs and for the executive participants. Planning retreats in 1993 in Cloudland Canyon and Lookout Mountain, Georgia, and in Maggie Valley in the Great Smoky Mountains in North Carolina resulted in improvements in the EEP-CBL programs.



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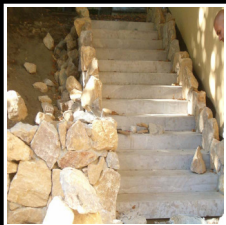
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Relocation of EEP-CBL programs to Florida

Knut and Gudrun agreed that they needed a larger pool of potential internship sponsors on the U.S. side, as businesses in the Tri-State area (Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama) had limited ability to accommodate the Czech executives. They also decided to offer shorter programs, as the Czechoslovak economy was picking up speed and it had become increasingly difficult for top-level Czech and Slovak executives to spend three months away from their companies or government jobs.

As the Petersons prayed about moving from the tri-state area of Georgia, Tennessee and Alabama, another “coincidence” took place when Knut received a phone call from Florida Governor Lawton Chiles’ office. Knut was invited to Tallahassee to discuss the possibility of relocating the *Executive Education Program for Czechoslovak Business Leaders* (EEP-CBL) programs to Florida. Jerry Wilson, a State of Florida official commissioned by Governor Chiles to expand Florida’s international trade programs.

Knut and Jerry discovered that their aims meshed nicely: relocating the programs to Jacksonville, Florida provided a larger pool of internship possibilities for program participants and provided the Jacksonville Chamber of Commerce with access to the top business executives from Central Europe. The common goal of ILI and the State of Florida was to develop and strengthen international economic cooperation, including mutual business transactions, establishment of offices and exchange of ideas for business growth between Central Europe and Florida.

This common goal was met with success that was both exhilarating and challenging for Knut and Gudrun, and all the people who worked with them to make the *Executive Education Program for Czechoslovak Business Leaders* (later rechristened *Business Leadership Forum: USA*) programs into a significant factor in the redevelopment of the Czechoslovak economy.



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In July, 1993, the International Leadership Institute relocated its headquarters and its EEP-CBL programs to the Jacksonville, Florida, area after signing a partnership agreement in Prague with the Jacksonville Chamber of Commerce, the University of North Florida, the Czech Ministry of Industry and Trade (Czechoslovakia was split into the Czech and Slovak Republics; later the Institute would sign a separate contract with the Slovak Chamber of Commerce in Bratislava).

At the end of 1993, Knut and Gudrun were ready for more “coincidences” as they left to visit Knut’s favorite spot in Switzerland, back from the times when he worked for the World Council of Churches in Geneva.



Gudrun at Piz Gloria in the Bernese Alps, Switzerland

At the top of the Bernese Alps, there is a restaurant called Piz Gloria, way above the tiny village of Murren. Piz Gloria slowly rotates atop the mountain of Schilthorn, at an elevation well above 9000 feet, giving a spectacular view of the surrounding snow-clad peaks.



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And so it went, as Knut and Gudrun prayed for the participants, for their safety, for the right matches with U.S. internship sponsors, for the right scheduling of programs, for their EEP-CBL program partners, and for new countries that might be included in their programs. Each time the Lord answered their prayer they acknowledged another “coincidence.” They marveled at how lucky they were in those years—there was not one single accident involving any program participant during the program, although the participants themselves drove the Institute’s vans all over North Florida, so as to have transportation to and from their internships. No one got seriously ill, no one committed a punishable offence, and no one was left without an internship (many had several U.S. internship sponsors and mentors).



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EEP-CBL program executives travel to Sarasota, Florida

The International Leadership Institute received quite a bit of publicity, both in the U.S. and abroad, for the executive education programs. Newspaper articles on EEP-CBL program partici-

pants, interviews with American businesses that sponsored executive interns, radio and TV coverage, videos, the Institute’s own marketing and publicity, and the word-of-mouth recommendations of many satisfied participants and businesses had produced a modest kind of fame for the programs.

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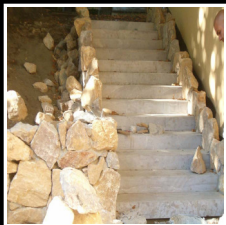
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The Institute's EEP-CBL programs reached their climax in December, 1995, when Czech Prime Minister Vaclav Klaus visited Florida to receive the World Institute for Capitalism award for showing leadership in building sustainable capital markets in the Czech Republic.



"Knut Peterson" meets with Prime Minister Vaclav Klaus in Ponte Vedra, Florida, as Klaus receives a prize for promoting world capitalism.

The Czech government's support of the EEP-CBL programs was highlighted in the speeches given at the award dinner. Knut and Gudrun were thrilled to meet with Mr. Klaus there, as he announced that, due to the hard work of many government agencies, private businesses, political parties, and determined individuals, the Czech Republic's economic and political transition from communism was officially complete; the Czechs had built a country that operated according to a functioning political democracy and a free-market economy in just 6 years.

By the time that the Czech government declared it no longer needed foreign aid, in December 1995, Knut and Gudrun's idea of bringing executives to the U.S. and introducing them to their American business counterparts had mushroomed into dozens of successful business transactions totaling over \$1,000,000, 000. As well, the executive participants made friends with their internship sponsors, host families and the many American they met at church, in informal social gatherings, at sports events and while seeing some of the most beautiful parts of the U.S.A.

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In fact, all of these “coincidences” were, from Knut and Gudrun’s point of view, not coincidences at all. They were evidence of God’s guidance and assistance in the monumental task they’d taken on—to change the business climate of the newly-free Czechoslovakia from one of laziness, lack of interest in innovation, complete ignorance of marketing and no understanding that the “bottom line” of a true business is profitability to a climate of hard work, setting of ambitious goals and bringing businesses to profitability and growth. In just a few years, the Czechs were challenged to change their artificially-protected economy to a genuine market-driven economy.

When Knut and Gudrun had first arrived in Czechoslovakia, they had expressed alarm at the lack of moral principles they encountered in discussions of business practices. Their friends there told them that there had



EEP-CBL executive participant Vlastimil Zajicek and Gudrun, waving from the U.S. Ambassadors’ residence in Prague at the party honoring the EEP-CBL programs.

been three principal dicta which applied during the totalitarian communist regime:

1. They pretend to pay us, we pretend to work.
2. He who does not steal from the government, steals from his own family.
3. The communist system is so hopelessly corrupted and rotted from within that it can’t be reformed; it must be abandoned, and something new must take its place.



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Taken together, these somewhat cynical dicta had produced a people whose faith in their own country was almost non-existent. It's one thing to uncover a few dishonest politicians; when the entire country is run by people who act no better than thieves, crooks and thugs, then honest people have to distance themselves from their own leaders. This distance had become, over the years, a chasm into which any principles of trust, mutual respect and hope for the future had fallen. Knut and Gudrun felt strongly that their task was to "excavate the chasm" of moral failing and reestablish a business system in which honesty and fair dealing is expected and rewarded. The EEP-CBL programs were highly successful, helping more than 900 Czech and Slovak executives to gain knowledge of American "best practices" in business, to see a well-functioning free-market economy in action and to build relationships with their American counterparts.

Beginning in 1996, Knut and Gudrun used the experience they had gained from running the EEP-CBL programs to extend their reach into other former Soviet bloc countries by becoming training providers for World Learning in Washington, DC, a contractor for the U. S. Department of State's USAID (Agency for International Development) programs. World Learning officers were looking for participant placements in Florida, and (another of those pesky coincidences!) contacted the International Leadership Institute to see if they'd be interested in preparing a program for executives from Romania, Croatia and Slovakia.

The International Leadership Institute became one of the training providers invited to bid on subsequent USAID programs for professionals from Bulgaria, Croatia, Bosnia/Herzegovina, and Macedonia through 2004; after 2004, changes in USAID under the administration of George W. Bush caused much of the money previously set aside for these training programs to be redirected to military action in Afghanistan and Iraq. What economic development funding remained was targeted for countries with less developed economic and political systems.



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Like the *Business Leadership Forum: USA* programs, the USAID programs were very successful, giving participants from the governmental and private sectors of Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia and Macedonia, an introduction to American practices in their professional fields. The International Leadership Institute provided training for executives from industries including banking, pension funds, food and beverage distribution, electrical infrastructure and e-commerce.

In addition, the *American English Language Immersion Programs in the United States*, conducted from 1991 to the present, brought students from the Czech and Slovak Republics, Switzerland, Ukraine and Germany to the U.S. to live with an American host family while receiving instruction in the English language, as well as the historical, political and cultural basis of the U.S. All told, more than 1,200 people from Central and Eastern Europe took part in programs run by the International Leadership Institute. What a great harvest was reaped from prayer and listening to God! And what an exceedingly large number of “coincidences” made it all possible.



The red roofs of Prague, courtesy Luis Blanco



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