



"I really like the hot sparkling water", says Ottó Daróczy, who leads our finance group in Budapest. "I usually read newspapers here and sometimes I even bring my work. I must say, the structures and advice I create here are in many cases my best products."

The pressure is now on our IT department to find a source of waterproof laptop computers that will float...

## PRAGUE

How did we start in Prague? One of our multi-national telecom clients in Vienna decided to set up a telecoms

operation in the Czech Republic in 1990. The lawyer we then collaborated with, Vladimír Paul, became a founder of our Prague office, and is now a member of the Czech Constitutional Court. The office which he helped to found – along with two brave volunteers from the Vienna office (Günther Horvath and Willibald Plesser), plus Czech lawyer Josef Vejmelka and Miluska Vrzackova – now has around

15 lawyers, and clients like Ford, Interbrew, Lego, Microsoft, Merck Sharp Dohme, General Electric, Bank Austria, Creditanstalt and UPS.

As Josef Vejmelka explains: "Our Prague office began in leased premises in a private apartment filled by an art collection almost as rich as the national museum's. But we soon found ourselves moving to a new office, after our first landlord decided he did not want us to step on his carpets, move his chairs or meet clients on his premises.

"The second choice of location appeared to be the right one – leaving aside the fact that our new landlord had been shot for unknown reasons – although we had two lawyers using a kitchen for an office, which led to delicious and spicy

legal opinions. But all good things happen three times, and we moved into our current offices in 1993."

Since 1990, the number of fee-earners and other staff has increased to 25 and, more importantly, the number of clients has grown just as dramatically. Practising law in the early days was far from easy – the law was changing so quickly that sometimes the amendments were changed even before they were published. Moreover, hundreds of new statutes were adopted without any clue as to their interpretation, while investors waited at the door. It was a very exciting time for legal advisers.



■ Miluska Vrzackova, Marketa Zachova, Daniel Malis and Jitka Zelezna

Our Prague team (above) are not the most active party organisers in our network, but they take a particular pride in their very special Christmas celebrations, which are attended not only by local staff but by many of their international colleagues. The Czech cuisine, the traditional orchestra, the portraitist who creates his masterpieces during the party and the barman's cocktails combine to provide a very special atmosphere.

Says Josef: "The first years of our Heller Löber Bahn practice will always be remembered as an incredible change in our lives in all respects. For us who have been here from the start it will always be an experience. Nonetheless, it has now become more important that we identify ourselves with our new firm and contribute to its world-wide success. Ubi concordia, ibi victoria – 'where there is unity, there is victory'."

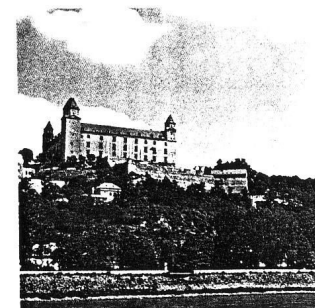
"Prague is one of the most beautiful and best preserved cities in the world: by comparison our team is very young and our history very short. But seen from the 'new' historical perspective, our Prague office belongs to the top tier of international law firms in the Czech Republic."

## BRATISLAVA

As we approach the ten-year anniversary of our Bratislava office's opening in February 1991, we have witnessed truly dramatic historical changes in the country. Slovakia is a relative newcomer on the stage of democracies, having become independent after the Velvet Revolution against communism and the 'Velvet Divorce' from the Czech Republic in 1993. Once criticised for its focus inwards, it is now an up-and-coming nation, aspiring to become a full member of the EU, and our Bratislava office works for such familiar companies as Microsoft, Nordzucker, Neuber Slovakia, Biotronic, Dura AG and Holderbank.

Our legal staff has grown from two to ten in number, making us a large office by Slovak legal standards. This growth has also allowed us increasingly to handle more sophisticated matters. One of the best examples of this is the upcoming privatisation of the gas company SPP, Slovakia's largest-ever privatisation. Supported by Jon Rees in London and Paul Luiki in Vienna, and others from our London and Brussels offices, the Bratislava team recently pitched for a project to represent a consortium of Ruhrgas, Gaz de France and Snam, knowing that they were in stiff competition with at least three other law firms. Shortly before Christmas, the magic words appeared on the office fax machine: "Following our meeting in Bratislava, we have the pleasure to inform you that the Consortium has chosen Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer as external counsel for the SPP project." The SPP project promises to be one of our major projects in Bratislava this year.

"One thing we have been very successful in generally," says Dana Martinková, head of our English-speaking client team, "is taking control of drafting documents, whether we represent buyers or sellers. This has given us a decided advantage in negotiating deals." This may not be so easy in the SPP privatisation. "White & Case is representing the government and will likely be conducting an auction process. We and the consortium will have the challenge of conducting thorough and informative due diligence while taking a balanced approach to the purchase contract. Seeking too much contractual protection can backfire in an auction process."



Some of our clients in Bratislava are more than others. Jana Markechová, head of our English-speaking client team, recalls a telephone conversation ago from the managing director of Slova Nordzucker, a major German sugar refiner. His voice was hushed and very strange. I knew something was wrong. It turned out that he was dealing with fever. Not knowing much Slovak at the time, in the country very long, he asked whether I did I ever. I asked my husband, whether he could visit and see if there was any serious illness. Fortunately there wasn't. And a few days later, a healthy managing director brought by a car. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Nordzucker is now our office's main German client.

WILLI PLESSER, ULRIKE REIN, PAUL LUIKI, JOSEF VEJMELEK



■ From left to right: Stanislav Kovár, Peter Orlík, Dana Martinková, Willi Plesser, Jana Markechová and Greta Kopcová

■ Willi Plesser and Greta Kopcová toast the event

The event was a first for our Bratislava office. Stanislav Kovár and Peter Orlík, head of the Bar Association. A celebration seemed to be in the air. It was also a chance to meet existing senior lawyer team of Dana Martinková, only an hour's drive from Vienna, at the party.