Rawlplug
is my passion

Interview with Radosław Koelner
CEO, Rawlplug
How does it feel to be an owner of a brand with such a vast legacy who will lead it into another century of operations?

I have a lot of humility and modesty within me, and it is there every day, but I am also aware that we have achieved so much ever since we purchased Rawlplug to bring back to the world the values which had laid foundations for the brand’s power in the past, and which drive us all as we seek to strengthen and develop it today. This boosts my ambitions for doing more and doing it better. Having such a great and dedicated team, capitalising on the major investments we have completed over the recent years, making the most of our comprehensive portfolio of products, services and training courses matching the needs of every construction sector, I am deeply convinced that another 100 years of the Rawlplug brand will deliver an abundance of evidence for its strength. We have

father originally had, as he manually produced socket wrenches which he would then individually sell, and how equally determined my mother also was when – after dad had passed away – she single-handedly managed all the issues facing a fresh business in times so difficult to all Polish people. Before she managed to convince herself that she had actually made the right choice by not closing the enterprise down, she had to learn everything on her own and experience it first-hand, from chemical and mechanical processing to sales. She is a truly invincible woman – so strong, and yet so kind to others. I’m sure that many people helped us in those hard times because of her alone. They were parents of the children my mother had taught before taking over the family business in its infancy. She’s no longer involved in managing the company, but still takes an active part in its daily life, and not just as the Chairperson of the Supervisory Board of Rawlplug S.A. She often visits us to meet

at our Wroclaw-based manufacturing plant than the flood consumed literally everything. There were many of us who survived by climbing to the roof of one of the buildings, waiting for help. Never before had we suffered so much property damage. At times, we thought it was all over. Fortunately, these miserable moments were very short, and we soon regained a positive attitude. There is hidden gain in every loss. We’ve been flooded. So what? It can be fixed. That’s when we decided to build our business anew, with new machinery. It may sound overly contemplative, but I believe everything happens for a reason.

And what was the reason why you decided to acquire the Rawlplug brand?

It’s hard to say what the reason was, since it was largely a coincidence which clearly proves that what is meant to happen will eventually happen in due time.

2004 was a very intense year for us. We floated on the stock exchange, we had just retrofitted our machinery, and we bought shares in the “Wapienica” saw and tool manufacturing plant. We were far from planning another big investment. And there came the proposal to buy Rawlplug – a brand with vast heritage, yet falling into decline and experiencing serious financial problems at that time. Although we had to spend as much as 14.5 million pounds, I was sure we were facing a unique opportunity, a once-in-a-lifetime chance to make the most of the momentum and extend the brand’s product offering, start building a comprehensive portfolio and let the business enter a truly international market. I knew we were taking a huge risk, but I also believed it was the right decision, and

was convinced that the step we had made was actually a quantum leap on the path of growth.

Did everything go as planned?

But of course not! Our enthusiasm, high hopes and ambitious plans soon hit the wall of constraints we would continuously come across. It’s no secret that the situation we had to tackle in Glasgow was more than difficult. It was a clash between great expectations and the need to – let’s face it – pull up our sleeves and get on with the apathy, fear of the new and demotivation. What we brought to the United Kingdom once we had acquired the brand was new business contacts along with an urgent need to manufacture massive quantities of products, and meanwhile, in the wake of the former managerial policy and the resulting poor operating practices, we were incapable of attaining the slightest minimum of our initial goals. The Glasgow hard times coincided with further investments. Soon afterwards, we started the long process of acquisition of the Śrubex S.A. screw and bolt factory in Łańcut, which required us to implement broad-scale projects in numerous operating areas, and to consequently become deeply involved in operating and financial terms. It was a very difficult time for all of us. With all hands on deck, we had to make many decisions which often turned out to be difficult.

all been doing our best to make sure that what comes to the customers’ minds whenever they think of fixings, fasteners and tools is the single word: Rawlplug. What do I feel? Pride. Enthusiasm. Strong conviction that it’s just the beginning.

But the true beginning of this story dates back more than 30 years into the past...

When I think back to the times when we were using a lonely injection moulding machine installed inside the laundry room of our house, making noise that shook the building to its foundations, and then take a look at our manufacturing plants equipped with some of the most technologically advanced machinery there is, I instantly flash back to the long way we have travelled to be where we are now. It’s astounding to realise how much determination my

with people, asking about their problems, celebrating their achievements, making sure they feel good, and initiating help whenever it’s needed, which she is always aware of because she has the special thing inside her which makes others intuitively certain that they can trust her. On the one hand, she is tough, but on the other hand, she is very open-hearted. Krystyna Koelner is an incredible woman who has endowed me and my brother Przemysław with her most potent values, including self-confidence, indomitable perseverance and open-mindedness. I will always cherish her for this.

When did you find these values most useful?

Such moments came in massive numbers. One of them was the great flood of 1997. No sooner had we started intense extension and development works
What was the most difficult one?

Every single one seemed difficult at that time. However, looking back, I believe the hardest decision was to close down the Glasgow manufacturing plant and to streamline the Łańcut assets in the midst of the 2008 economic crisis. It was such a pity we had to shut down the British factory, but it was prerequisite of further growth. Following numerous attempts to implement initially evolutionary, and then revolutionary reforms, with the limitations we had to tackle, firm in our conviction, we finally arrived at the conclusion that it was the only decision we could make. On the one hand, it entailed the necessity to strengthen the Polish manufacturing plants by investing in the machinery and equipment as well as new competencies, while on the other hand, the wave of cheap Chinese products that flooded markets forced us to intensify our capitalisation on the decisions previously made at the turn of 2009 and 2010. The manufacturing, logistic and managerial processes had already been tidied up and put in order, allowing the business to operate on stable and solid foundations, so it was high time we began expansion. That’s when we embarked on a market conquest, and mindful of the previous painful experiences immediately following the purchase of the Rawlplug brand, we suddenly realised its power. What was and still ahead of us is the task of building and maintaining brand awareness and image in many markets, particularly in Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia, but it turned out that people of former British colonies are well familiar with our long-term strategy to ensure that it becomes the brand of choice for customers all around the world.

When did you gain momentum?

We had to wait quite a while for some peace of mind. We started capitalising on the decisions previously made at the turn of 2009 and 2010. The manufacturing, logistic and managerial processes had already been tidied up and put in order, allowing the business to operate on stable and solid foundations, so it was high time we began expansion. That’s when we embarked on a market conquest, and mindful of the previous painful experiences immediately following the purchase of the Rawlplug brand, we suddenly realised its power. What was and still ahead of us is the task of building and maintaining brand awareness and image in many markets, particularly in Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia, but it turned out that people of former British colonies are well familiar with the brand, and they cherish the memory of the quality and reliability of its products. It was time to make another watershed decision, namely initiation of the process of renaming the company from Koelner to Rawlplug.

Didn’t you feel a tinge of sadness when the brand was no longer named after your family name?

I have never perceived this aspect from such a perspective. My personal ambitions involve building a strong and stable business giving satisfaction to many people: our employees and customers all around the world, and providing those who use building embedded with our products with the sense of security and reliability. It gives me pride, it stimulates me to work, it mobilises me to keep planning the future. 2013 saw the official change of the company name from Koelner S.A. to Rawlplug S.A. Koelner is still a strong brand among the three in our portfolio, having its distinctive purpose and target. But it is Rawlplug that functions as the foundation of our business growth, upon which we’ve been building our long-term strategy to ensure that it becomes the brand of choice for customers all around the world.

Instead of the family business, a corporation has arisen?

I don’t want to perceive Rawlplug as a corporation. We operate on the grounds of a strictly defined strategy, we manage elaborate organisational structures in a dozen or so countries, our products are available in more than 70 countries on all continents, and our offering is so comprehensive and inherently complementary that not only do we deliver state-of-the-art products, but also specialises services and innovative training schemes, our manufacturing plants are among the most technologically advanced facilities in Europe, and we work in line with globally recognised standards and restrictive procedures. I’m well aware that we qualify as a corporation on account of how we run the business. But I’m also determined not to forget that it is the people who matter most in such a well-knit and highly structured machine, because their commitment and dedication determine how successful we are today, and whether we can be even stronger tomorrow. There are people working at Rawlplug whom I know and respect, to whom I’m profoundly grateful for their unwinding work passion they have been demonstrating for more than 30 years. We may not be next of kin, but our bonds are nearly family-like.

How to build and sustain such relationships in a business employing more than 1,500 persons around the world?

Everyone knows such bonds don’t come out of the blue, that people must have the will to build them. And Rawlplug’s role is to enable it, to encourage them and to create conditions favourable enough to make people feel comfortable. Our divisions are scattered all over the world, and although they are all managed in line with the same business model, we differ a lot from one another. Rawlplug is a melting pot of cultures, customs, languages, personalities, competencies and skills. What makes us strong is the ability to nurture this diversity. Our common denominator is continuous improvement, manifesting itself in our pursuit to deliver state-of-the-art solutions you can trust. What you need to achieve this goal is open-mindedness, willingness to accept different standpoints and lessons learnt by experience, but also capacity to make the most of such diversity, to inspire one another and to share knowledge. You need a real team to get there, and so we’ve been working daily towards making this team stronger.

What else do you consider to be Rawlplug’s strength today?

All our acquisitions to date were meant to diversify our offering under respective product categories. We’ve been gathering know-how, building competencies, investing in infrastructure, creating competitive advantage. Rawlplug is currently the only brand in the world that manufactures and delivers to its customers products that cater to virtually every segment of the construction industry. Each of them comes in several up to several dozen varieties, depending on the substrate type, application, and installation conditions. Each comes with dedicated accessories, and altogether form a complete fixing system. What motivates us in designing the Rawlplug portfolio of products is the customers’ true needs, while the performance and reliability of our solutions is our priority. Let me repeat what I have already mentioned, namely that good is not enough for us. This is why Rawlplug’s offering is not only professional products, but also specialises services and innovative training courses. Architects, engineers, constructors, contractors and vendors may count on our support at every stage of their investments, from design to operation. What goes around comes around, as they say. Dating back to the 1940s, you could see the following slogan in Rawlplug’s advertisement: “A service that begins with a line on a drawing board.” I would be a liar if I told you we

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Rawlplug is my passion
were not astonished by the fact that such a comprehensive approach to customer service is one of the foundations of Rawlplug’s heritage. Heritage which allows us to respond to the needs of the present while curiously awaiting the future.

Does today’s Rawlplug have a lot in common with the past enterprise?

Yes, and that never ceases to amaze me. As Rawlplug continued to operate all around the world managed by various owners, the brand had its ups and downs, but I really want to believe that the real breakthrough in Rawlplug’s history came in 2005 when we acquired the brand, becoming the first business owner with the opportunity to use the products in practice.

The brand became a part of a strong and growing enterprise, still a family business at that time, while we have made the best of the brand’s legacy and heritage, making informed decisions and gradually changing the entire organisation’s operating model.

And what do you find most impressive in the history of Rawlplug?

Rawlplug’s history is a story fit for cinema. It’s 100 years of true panache in operation, outstanding creativity, focus on innovation, but also 100 years of continuously looking into the future. I think everyone in the world knows how ingenious the first step Rawlplug made evidenced their focus on innovation, and not only in the sphere of the products they manufactured, but all their endeavours. It’s truly extraordinary that whatever the effort undertaken by the Rawlplug brand, it showcased the brand’s creativity, panache and unconventional approach to solving problems, stepping far beyond the standards of their day and age. Take the publicity campaign Rawlplug decided to deploy in the follow-up of their breakthrough invention of the world’s first wall plug. That’s when the brand spent thousands of pounds for press advertising. Acting with impressive panache and on a massive scale, the brand made a commercial sensation, all the more since never before had any construction company been advertised on Daily Mail’s front page! Further evidence for Rawlplug’s inventiveness was given by the Rawlplug Travelling Showrooms, which proved unquestionably supportive of the brand’s global expansion. It marked yet another revolution in marketing. The cars that travelled to all corners of the world, from Sweden to Australia, under several month long campaigns, made a sensation in each market where they appeared. Never before had the potential customers encountered such a direct form of commodity promotion combined with the opportunity to use the products in practice.

Speaking of expansion: what are Rawlplug’s plans for the future?

We are planning to consistently implement Rawlplug’s long-term strategy. One of its priorities is automation and digitisation of production processes. Over the recent years, we have invested vast amounts in the development of our competencies and infrastructure, which I am sure will allow us to mould the industry’s future reality. New machinery and equipment in our manufacturing plants which belong to the most technologically advanced facilities in the world. Specialised cutting-edge laboratories, including mechanical, metallographic, measuring and chemical labs. Accelerated prototyping process. High-precision verification of product behaviour under specific application conditions and comprehensive mechanical testing. Flexibility and quick response to the current needs of current and potential customers. Very high competencies and specialisation. The above are the spheres we consider crucial for our growth. Our continuous investing in these areas will exert a direct impact on our pursuit of the second of our priorities, which is sustainability. Reducing energy and labour intensity of manufacturing processes in a macro scale as well as quality, efficiency and safety improvement are but fractions of our master plan, the three pillars of the world with access to their products and services.
which are environmental care, management by values and social commitment. We truly believe that we must not do business without duly focusing on what is most important in our activity, and on what gives it potential and prospects for the future – nor do we want to ever lose this focus. The last of our priorities is the pursuit of Rawlplug’s vision to to become the customers first choice brand worldwide. Our products are already available in more than 70 countries, and while the whole world marvels at London’s Wembley Stadium, the Cape Town Stadium, the Yas Marina Formula 1 circuit, Dubai’s Burj Khalifa Tower, the Olympic Park in Sochi or the Grand Egyptian Museum in Giza, we know that Rawlplug is the unsung hero standing behind their panache, beauty and functionality. Still, we are hungry for more, and I’m sure we are right striving to satiate this appetite. When Rawlings invented the world’s first wall plug, he couldn’t possibly have suspected that 100 years later Rawlplug’s DIN 7984 screws would be used to build the Mars Curiosity rover. It allows us to boldly plan our future.

What do you wish for yourself and for others on Rawlplug’s 100th anniversary?

I am deeply convinced that today, in the year 2019, the true Renaissance man of the construction sector, which John Joseph Rawlings definitely was, would be proud of us all. I too am proud of being a part of a team I can always rely on. And even if they don’t hear me saying that on a daily basis, I want them to know how grateful I am for their never changing readiness to act, for always reaching out for more, for pursuing ambitious goals. I am proud that good is never enough for them. It’s a great pleasure to work with people with passion to act, who make the most of their involvement and devotion day by day to prove that together we are inclined and able to build a strong, reliable and trustworthy brand.

On the 100th anniversary of the Rawlplug brand, I wish all of you, dear employees and customers, to always be yourselves, to listen and speak out boldly, to stimulate and inspire others to action with your enthusiasm, to be determined in the pursuit of your goals, but mainly to know how to set them, to seek new opportunities, to welcome change, and to grow every day. May we all invariably know what truly matters to us.

Rawlplug is my passion. My personal dream is to witness the world acknowledge that profit and cost-effectiveness are no longer superior measures of success. It is by no means utopia, but rather a long-term obligation to deliver reliable and trustworthy solutions. It stands for streamlined activity based on best available practices for safety, quality as well as optimisation of production and operation costs. What for, one might ask. I am absolutely positive that the vision of our industry is to serve other sectors, since we are one of the intrinsic elements of their reality. And the more fixings and fasteners remain fully operational for the next 50, 100 or 200 years, the higher the comfort of life and operation we will be able to deliver – not only to others, but also to ourselves.

Krzysy Koelner
Chairperson of the Supervisory Board of Rawlplug S.A.

When I am thinking of what I have experienced here for the last 35 years, I get a sense of fulfilment. Thanks to my determination and consistency in action, I achieved things I had never dreamed of before. There were times of joy and success, but also times of failure and great difficulty. However, regardless of the situation, one thing has always been certain: we would not be where we presently are without the fantastic people who have been working here. I consider them to be most important. Their trust, attachment and loyalty are the key values which allow us to reach out for more. It is them who have actually made it possible to acquire Rawlplug and to proceed with the subsequent, often difficult transformations. Today, Rawlplug is managed by one of my sons, Radosław. He was looking for a place for himself for years, and here is where he has finally found it. He has dedicated time, energy, mind and soul to this company, and his contribution to Rawlplug’s growth is absolutely invaluable. Rawlplug is his true passion. I believe that everything we have experienced since 2005 as well as our current position prove how much can be achieved through engagement and dedication, and how powerful these qualities are. I am proud that it has allowed me to fulfil the promise I once made to myself, to my sons, and to other people. I feel like I have achieved something meaningful in life, and most importantly – something good.

What does Rawlplug mean to me? I have been with this company for over 20 years. It is thousands of lessons learnt, hundreds of different personalities encountered, millions of decisions made. Looking back, I can frankly say that I was maturing along with it. Working here has taught me to be patient, open and focused on making the most of every opportunity. This place gives you an unlimited space for growth, both professional and personal. From being a small business dreaming big, we have become an internationally present manufacturer of fixings, fasteners and tools. We celebrate our joy and pride of it with wonderful people from all corners of the world, who share passion, determination and curiosity of the future. We have travelled a long and winding road together, and what fascinates me most is the suspicion that the best is still ahead of us.