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Kids Time Fair 2017: A Look Inside Central and Eastern Europe's Largest Toy Fair

APRIL 13, 2017 BY REYNE RICE AND LENA HEDO



The largest trade show for toys, games, and children's products in Central and Eastern Europe, Kids Time 2017, was held in Kielce, Poland, from Feb. 23 to 25. The eighth annual international fair featured toys and products for babies and children, and recorded double-digit growth in key measurements, including more than 7,000 professional trade visitors and 474 exhibitors.

With overwhelming interest from exhibitors and buyers, the event organizers filled a total of seven exhibit halls, covering 16,292 square meters (more than 175,000 square feet), and had a wait list of nearly 100 manufacturers. Next year, the show organizers plan to add an eighth temporary hall to accommodate more curated exhibitors. The Targi Kielce Exhibition Center, home of Kids Time, is the second largest exhibition center in this part of Europe.

For the second year, the Kids Time Star Awards were presented at the trade show. Six winners were selected from a pool of eager and talented competition entrants across various categories, including toys, textiles, and baby products and furniture.

Why a Central and Eastern European Trade Show Matters

Export markets for international brands can reach into the Polish market and the 17 other countries that exhibit at this Fair. These surrounding countries include Belgium, China, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, Ukraine, the UK, and the U.S.

Buyers from more than 33 countries attended the fair, including buyers from Russia, China, and South Korea. Polish and Eastern European manufacturers produce high-quality and innovative products that cannot be found anywhere else. Some exhibitors still sell exclusively to the Polish market, while many others have strategic goals to expand their exports into other markets, including the North American and Western European markets.

Poland's annual birth rate alone is approximately 400,000, making it a thriving market for children's products. The Polish government instituted a program to encourage families to have more children. They provide a monthly stipend of 500 zloty* for the second child in the family and provide additional funding for additional children.

The original intent was for families to spend that money on the children. In the policy's first year, the assumption is that families have spent the money on other, more basic, needs. Toy stores have not yet seen an increase in sales, but the toy trade is optimistic that in the future some of these funds will be used for buying toys and other products for kids.

Kids Time Trade Show Happenings

The Kids Time trade show program included workshops, trend presentations, and more. Some highlights from this year included:

- Reyne Rice, global trend hunter and CEO of ToyTrends, from New York, provided the keynote speech on trends across toys, games, and kids' technology with photo examples across 10 key trends. She also discussed influences from the technology and entertainment industries.
- Dr. Maria Costa, director of children, education, and the leisure market, from the AIJU Institute in Valencia, Spain, presented the latest worldwide retailer trends. She also gave suggestions for shop-owners, showcasing dozens of inspirational photos from shops across multiple continents.
- Safety certification and knowledge was presented in a press conference by Marko, a key distributor and strategic partner to Targi Kielce.
- The second annual Russian-Polish Roundtable featured entrepreneurs from Poland and delegations from Russia and Belarus, with an emphasis on understanding the dynamics of the Russian market.
- A visual Inspiration Gallery, sponsored by *Swiat Zabawek*, provided retailers with merchandising ideas for in-store displays and window showcases.

Next year, Targi Kielce will hold a newly formulated conference program, specifically designed to inform Polish and Central and Eastern European manufacturers how to break into the North American marketplace. This will offer more visibility to the Polish, Central, and Eastern European manufacturers and offer U.S. and Canadian retailers new products with distinct points of difference for their consumers.

Speaking with Kids Time Exhibitors

Smily Play is a family-run manufacturer and distributor that has been in the market for more than 30 years. Stanislaw Wawer began the company as a toy manufacturer during the period when Poland was still run by Russia. Introductory products included baby pacifiers, card games, and basic role-play items, all manufactured in Poland. In the early 2000s, the company began producing its own branded items, under the umbrella brand name Smily Play, with a target age range of birth to 4 years. Smily Play is now also a distributor for other manufacturers, such as Mattel and Hasbro.

Smily Play is one of the largest distributors and manufacturers in Poland of toys for small children. The company has chosen to concentrate its sales only on the specialty market, which is appreciated by its retailer base. It also exports to some European markets.



Katarzyna Wawer of Smily Play stated that all of the company's products offer good quality, play value, and parental guidelines for a reasonable price.

Smily Play identified a need for young parents to encourage their children to be physically active, so it designed pull and push toys with wheels to support this demand. One of the other more recent additions to its product line includes a full range of fashions for large dolls and plush animals with gentle lullabies and simple light-up cheeks.

Trefl is a major manufacturer of games and puzzles and is a key distributor for other international brands such as PlayMonster, VTech, and Siku. The privately held company was founded in 1985, and its products are represented in more than 50 countries.

Trefl is the third largest manufacturer in Poland, following Mattel and Hasbro. In its early years, the company began with puzzle manufacturing in two different locations within Poland. One factory produces games and puzzles, and the other manufactures card games. Trefl also has key relationships with major licensing partners such as Disney, Nickelodeon, Warner Bros., Mattel, and Hasbro.

"Having the production in Poland is our strength, especially for Europe, so we can quickly deliver in-season goods." (who said this?)

Fun for Everyone is a new product line that the company is especially proud of. The company spent two years developing the line, and the range includes 50 products that were created for all kids, but is especially helpful for children who have sight or hearing disabilities. The puzzle pieces include tactile clues, such as stars, horizontal lines, and other textures with raised surfaces that can be felt with the fingertips. The pieces have verbal recordings that can assist in putting together the puzzles, explaining the themes of the puzzles and giving a visual image in the child's mind. TREFL worked very closely with organizations focused on children with disabilities for child testing. The line is new for this year and will only be sold in Poland, but is expected to expand into international markets in the future.



Mis Zdzis is a new range of wooden toys featuring a familiar nostalgic Polish spokesbear, and providing classic quality heritage wooden play.

Board game sales in Poland grew 30 percent each year for the past three years, and is mainly attributed to family and social party games. For example, 2016 annual sales of TREFL's 5-Second Rule game sold more than 300,000 pieces in Poland to a population of 38 million people. The company has more than 400 puzzle designs, and is pleased with the continued growth in the established categories of games and puzzles.

Whisbear is a newer Polish manufacturer that has garnered multiple awards from the UK, Germany, and within Poland. Its distribution has expanded to 16 countries, launching in the U.S. market in April 2017. The company's Whisbear product uses a patented sound technology and creative design patent for soft plush products.

The internal safe magnets and external long legs of this contemporary bear ensures that new parents can position and attach the product to the crib to serve as a playtime companion. Whisbear's patented cry sensor is one of the most popular features because it soothes baby to sleep. The new 2017 holiday product line features a soft sloth character and extends the cry-sensor time feature to 40 minutes at a time. It also adds an app that allows parents to turn on the soothing sounds remotely.



New 2017 Whisbear holiday product line features a soft sloth character. With Co-Founders: COO Julia Sielicka-Jastrzebska, and CEO Zuzanna Sielicka-Kacznaska.

**NOTE: 500 zloty is equivalent to approximately 120 Euros or \$125 U.S. dollars. Wages in Poland were 4065.52 zloty/ month (the equivalent of \$1,016 U.S. dollars or €958 euro) in the fourth quarter of 2016, so this stipend is a significant amount for Polish families. (Source: Tradingeconomics.com/Central Statistical Office of Poland (GUS)).*

About the Authors: Lena Hedo and Reyne Rice serve as co-presidents of the International Toy Trade Magazine Association (ITMA). Hailing from Stockholm, Sweden, Lena Hedo is editor-in chief and publisher of the *Lek & BabyRevyn Magazine*, and also works for the Toy and Baby Association in Sweden. Reyne Rice, a global trend hunter from New York, is a journalist and contributing editor for multiple international publications, including *The Toy Book* and *Spirit of Play*. As a toy industry analyst, and consultant with more than 30 years of experience in marketing, researching, and analyzing the toy industry, children's and family technology, and the youth market, she owned her own consultancy, Toy Trends, since 2003 and can be reached at Reyne@ReyneRice.com.

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