

## **Kickoff presentation: Ex Libris Comes To the U.S.**

*Jerry Specht, Jan. 18, 2017*

Before I start with that I want to say a few sentences (five to be exact) about Jane [Burke] ....

As some of you know I was hired by Jane in 1984 to work on another, earlier, library system, NOTIS. After 10 years of tremendous success, executives of Ameritech, which had bought NOTIS in 1991, decided, in their infinite wisdom, in May of 1994, to fire her and a third of the Evanston staff. (A move I often cite as the biggest mistake in the history of library automation.) The *\*minute\** I understood that this was what was going down I said to myself: "Mr. Ameritech, you better watch your back. You don't understand who you're dealing with. Jane Burke is gonna eat your lunch!" -- which, as we all know, to the benefit of the library world, is exactly what happened.

In 1998, the trajectory of my own career intersected Ex Libris' attempt to break into the North American library software market. Notre Dame had bought and implemented Aleph early in 1998. Their courage and foresight in being the first major North American library to do this was a critical first step in Ex Libris' success in North America. A number of (Israeli) Ex Libris staff were in South Bend working with Notre Dame, but it was clear that there would be a need for an *office* in the U.S. to accommodate other hoped-for future customers. A location on Wells St. in the Old Town section of Chicago was chosen: definitely *not* a high-rent, high-tech location in those days.

Let's just say Ex Libris didn't pull into the U.S. in some fancy Cadillac:



It was more like a VW bus:



These are some photos of the street our office was on, in the same block as Second City and the rather eclectic, idiosyncratic Treasure Island grocery store. This is a view looking south on Wells from Eugenie St. Note the "CLEANERS" sign.



Our office was here, just to the right of the CLEANERS sign, on the second floor....  
Note the green thermometer. That was on the right-hand side of the entrance to our offices.  
The establishment immediately below our office was a bar: Tequila Roadhouse.



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This is a close-up of the entrance to the office, with the famous red sign. These are Tequila Roadhouse decorations.



Opening the door, this is the stairway leading up to our offices on the second floor.



Going up the stairs and inside,...  
this is a view from the back of the office towards the front (the street side):





There were 9 or 10 desks, in two offices and the general open space. Though there was furniture in the offices when these photos were taken, there was *none* when we had our first meeting. We (all seven of us, I think?) sat on the floor -- or maybe some cardboard boxes?

Perhaps Oren remembers that meeting.



This was the back porch / the “smoking balcony”...



As you can see, we were a bit challenged in the "professional appearance" department. Oren will have something to say in a minute about how this affected our efforts to woo a certain large North American university library as our *second* customer.

It was a risky venture for all of us. Ex Libris was investing time and money in trying to get things started, without any real assurance that it would work, and we, new American employees were throwing in our lot with a non-North-American company which had only a single major customer in North America.

Why were we willing to take this risk? I'd done my homework. I'd researched Ex Libris. Certain people whose opinions I valued felt it could work. But the main thing was the people. A "company" is not a bunch of offices, a bunch of desks and computers. A company is people. I'd met Azriel (Morag, the founder and chairman of Ex Libris) and Udi (Arad, his brother-in-law and president of the company), and had been favorably impressed with their intelligence and enthusiasm, and then I met this guy [*Oren*], the "Vice President of Operations", for lunch at Walker Brothers in Evanston in the Fall of 1998. If hired, he would be my boss. I was completely blown away by this bright, cosmopolitan guy, with his quiet confidence and determination and his deep understanding of library/information systems. I left Walker Brothers telling myself that not only did I want to work for this company; I *\*had\** to work for this company.

I believe that there's a very simple formula for success in business: really good employees attract other really good employees; really good customers attract other really good customers. But there has to be something at the core, something as a starting point. To me, that something was Yohanan and Judy Levi in 1980; Azriel and Udi in 1986; and then in 1988 and 1991, Oren and Barbara Rad-El.

Many thanks to Carl Grant who was the first president of Ex Libris U.S. and graciously provided me with **all** of the photographs shown in this segment today (-- except the Cadillac and the VW bus – which I found myself on the Web...).