

# Half a Century of the Bürgenstock Conference: A Pilgrim's Tale

Jay S. Siegel\*



Jay S. Siegel  
Dean, School of  
Pharmaceutical Science  
and Technology  
Tianjin University

Among the many stories my supervisor Kurt Mislow told me during my PhD studies, I was touched by one in which he recounted his adventures at the first EUChE Conference on Stereochemistry (now known simply as the “Bürgenstock Conference”), and revealed his admiration for André Dreiding, its founder. He described a meeting of stereochemists (also known as chiroso-phists) that had rapidly become legendary at a venue akin to the Hall of the Mountain King from Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*—where an intellectual’s fantasy of rigorous discourse and indulgent divertissement became reality. Then, in the summer of 1982, I found a note on my lab bench “see me, Doc”. All members of the Mislow group were familiar with these famous scribbled messages, found sometimes on the chalkboard, occasionally on scraps of paper, and most formally on post-it notes. They were harbingers, sometimes ominous and at other times auspicious. This time it meant for me to meet none other than André and Norma Dreiding, who were visiting Princeton. After a brief exchange, Kurt mentioned in passing my interest in spending a year abroad, to which André immediately replied with a welcoming invitation, which in turn led to my spending the period August 1983–July 1984 studying jointly with Jack Dunitz (ETH Zurich) and André Dreiding (University of Zurich). In the spring of 1984, Jack asked me if I would like to be a student

worker at the Bürgenstock Conference and I jumped at the chance to live the legend.

The train from Zürich arrived in Luzern expectedly on time and with little ado. Proceeding with much haste, I made it to the pier in time to catch the earlier boat bound for Kehrsiten. Stepping onto the boat on that clear warm spring day in 1984, the mood changed. In every direction, the mirror surface of the Vierwaldstättersee (Lake Lucerne) reflected the majestic mountains that defined the water’s bounds in a manner I had only envisioned from fairytale dreams. From

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the port at Luzern it was difficult to make out our destination. Only after rounding the bend in the lake could one see clearly the tiny dock at Kehrsiten, nestled between the water’s edge and the steep tree-lined slope. At Kehrsiten, I climbed into one of the bright red cabins of the 1888 Bürgenstock funicular to begin the ascent. As the funicular elevated physically, the views back across the lake elevated aesthetically. The surreal setting—a bucolic shoreline spotted with family farms, free-roaming cows clanging their bells, the redolence of cabin fireplaces—filled the senses. Suddenly, I felt like pilgrim on his first pilgrimage, the destination: the legendary Bürgenstock Conference where every year since 1964, the masters of modern stereochemistry congregated annually!

As we disembarked, a clerk greeted us with a formidable register that provided the record of each guest and his/her hotel name and room assignment. It was my good fortune to be rooming with Yibin Xiang, a student from China, who was accompanying Professor You Wang from Shanghai. We were assigned a spectacular room on the 4th floor of the Palace Hotel, with balcony overlooking the lake. This was a life to which one could easily become accustomed.

Soon after arriving my duties as student worker began. Professor Manfred Schlosser took charge of orienting us; our stations were many; each fitted a precise taxonomy laid out in a well-articulated “Pflichtenheft” (list of duties): the precarious cleaning of the boards, the tedious monitoring of the lights, the scrupulous projecting of slides, and the onerous learning and writing of names. We received training in each area, as well as clear instructions not to be seen nor heard in the execution of our stations.

Leon Ghosez was president that year and the list of speakers was expectedly illustrious. Despite the prestige of the plenary lectures and the formality of procedure, at the Bürgenstock, the strength of scientific argument and not title of office would carry the day. This came home clearly and personally when a discussion broke out among high-level participants about the details of a paper Kurt and I had just published on stereogenicity and local chirality (see *J. Am. Chem. Soc.* **1984**, *106*, 3319). It was decided to hold an impromptu panel discussion on the matter and as the

[\*] Prof. Dr. J. S. Siegel  
School of Pharmaceutical Science and  
Technology  
Tianjin University  
92 Weijin Road, Nankai District  
Tianjin, 300072, P. R. China  
E-mail: dean\_spst@tju.edu.cn

panel of senior professors convened, André suddenly stood up and called me down from the projection booth to defend what we had written. The experience taught me a lot about the importance of clarity in thought and expression; as well as the responsibility as author.

When we were not at station, there was ample time to mingle and Bürgenstock was clearly *the* place to weave a strong mesh among the chemistry community. The participants lived culture in all aspects. Discussions were abound on music, literature, philosophy, and of course science with a focus on stereochemistry. I had never been among such an assembly of scholars so eager to talk day and night about everything and anything of interest.

The meeting was not overloaded with talks, only 14 plenary lectures and a very informal poster session, with many hand-drawn posters covering ideas in their most nascent forms. It was fantastically fresh and inspiring, something lost in today's overly validated and metricized scientific enterprise. I remember a quote from André over dinner about the timing of plenary lectures: "Plenary sessions are around 90 minutes and can range from 80-minute lectures provoking 10 minutes of questions to 10-minute lectures stimulating 80 minutes of questions". He then added: "we are still hopeful for a speaker of the latter".

That week I met numerous scholars who became close friends and scientific confidants. I decided then and there that this meeting would be my "scientific holiday" and I have been back over two dozen times. I have further had the good fortune to be a speaker (1998), a moderator several times, and a committee member (2005–2010).

A special feature of the early Bürgenstock meeting was the humorous lecture, a pseudoscientific spoof on the weeks events told by a guest on the last night without prior knowledge of the speakers. During the time when Andrea Vasella was president, I was called to this task as well. It meant staying attentive to all lectures and activities

through out the week and committed one to a "hermetic" last afternoon in preparation; but, it remains one of my fondest memories.

Over the course of many years, many of my closest scientific friendships were founded at Bürgenstock. It has been a venue where I have enjoyed many fruitful encounters and stimulating activities from before dawn to after midnight, such as coincidental meetings over an early breakfast, long afternoon walks through the pastoral hills, revitalizing sauna sessions before dinner, convivial fondue evenings, and late-night discussion over drinks.

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The mountain venue hosted many wonderful discussions and disclosures about chemistry and its various outreachings. It was also an arena for great controversy. At one meeting Tanaka claimed that configuration as determined by Bijvoet (and consistent with Emil Fischer's arbitrary assignment) was wrong, and after considerable discussion the conflicting data were brought into harmony. At another meeting, the work of Zadel, Breitmaier et al., which had been published in *Angewandte Chemie*, on the influence of magnetic fields on the stereochemical course of reactions was contested; I believe the open and spontaneous critique substantially contributed to the admission that the results were fabricated, thus correcting a serious mistake in the literature (for an overview of the case see *Angew. Chem. Int. Ed. Engl.* **1994**, 33, 1457).

The Bürgenstock program always allows for important scientific discussion. It is clear that this meeting is valuable for the scientific community as it is on one hand important for its deep historical significance, and on the other hand crucial for what it preserves of great scientific tradition for future generations. Every meeting contained a lesson

learned and further brought together the family of stereochemists. As the Bürgenstock meeting turns 50 in 2015 and the world is filled with bio/nano rhetoric, it is worth remembering that the continuation of this meeting, based broadly on critical scholarly discussion, was not always evident.

Philippe Renaud and I joined the Committee just as the decision was made to sell and renovate the Bürgenstock resort. The finances of the meeting were also running low. There was great concern that this might spell an end to the meeting. Conservatives could not part with the idea of leaving the mountain and opted for Hotel Fügen, which although close to the original site physically was distant aesthetically. Phillippe, Kim Baldrige, and I met one day to travel to Brunnen and the Hotel Waldstätterhof. It was clear that this new location on the lake would be a departure from the mountain venue but not from the spirit of the conference as conceived by André. Together with the other colleagues (E. Peter Kündig, Klaus Müller, Jérôme Lacour, Donald Hilvert, Helma Wennemers, and Reto Naef) we were able to breathe new life into the conference, and with this new life came new industrial support and scientific prosperity.

My favorite aspect of the early Bürgenstock meetings was the ability to have candid scholarly discussions and engage in other spontaneous creative activities on a leisurely timescale without the need to punch even a virtual time clock. Regrettably, in the modern culture of bibliometrics and certified work products, it has been natural for the modern embodiment of the Bürgenstock meeting to sacrifice some of its unstructured elements and copious free time. Strengthening anew the free-wheeling character will be a challenge to presidents of the next decade.

From our new post in China, Kim and I make a modern pilgrimage this year to celebrate in Brunnen this special 50th anniversary of the event that André Dreiding founded. We wish the conference great success and future decades of vitality.