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ICCST Retrospective

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The ICCST conference series had its origin sometime during 1969 or 1970, in a phone call from Professor Yoshiyuki Okamoto of New York University that I received at my Xerox Corporation laboratory. He had heard that I was engaged in editing a book on selenium chemistry¹¹. In the course of the discussion, it also became apparent that we had a common interest in selenium polymers. Okamoto then made the suggestion that we might jointly organize a symposium on the matter. As venue he suggested New York City where he had good contacts at the New York Academy of Sciences. My co-editor Dan Klayman and I had already assembled much of the necessary scientific contacts via the book project. Also, we (actually the publisher, Wiley Interscience) had received a \$10,000 grant for the book from the Selenium and Tellurium Development Association (STDA). We again contacted that organization for a grant to defray some expenses. I can't remember details but, in exchange for half a promise of receiving financial consideration, we acquired a third co-chairman in the person of Eugene

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M. Elkin of Canadian Copper refineries, who would represent the interests of the STDA.

Okamoto was a member of the New York Academy of Sciences, I quickly joined and we attended a few conferences. I became an avid reader of the blue paperback *Annals* that covered such a wonderfully diverse range of scientific subjects. I still own 55 volumes, collected over the subsequent decade.

A proposal was worked out for verbal presentation to the Program Committee of the New York Academy of Sciences. To our great delight, they agreed to host the meeting, even proposed a relatively short time-scale for implementation. Since the Academy was hosting such conferences primarily for the benefit of its members, minimal external publicity would be required. In order to save time and to control expenses, it was decided that all presentations for a two-day conference would be by invitation only.

A flurry of recruiting activity for speakers ensued. By comparison to this era of e-mail and internet, communication was inconceivably slow. Even brand-new, high tech options often missed the mark. I recall using one of the first generation fax machines that had just been introduced by Xerox to send an urgent revision of a few pages to my co-editor Dan Klayman at Walter Reed Army Institute of Research. Since the world-wide fax directory (maybe 20 pages) did not list an installation at Walter Reed, I dispatched the item to the Xerox sales office in Washington, DC, fully expecting that somebody would jump into a car, deliver the item with a flourish, and combine that with a very convincing sales call. Wrong! It arrived at my co-editor's office three days later. The

Xerox receptionist had ignored my cover note, simply placed the transmission into an envelope, and dispatched it by mail.

Regardless, our program was filling quite rapidly. Local acquaintances and co-workers were recruited by phone, many confirming replies from abroad arrived by return mail. I was especially glad to receive acceptances from some of the illustrious contributors to the selenium book.

First and foremost, there was Professor Arne Fredga of Uppsala University, Sweden, who had been active in the field of organoselenium chemistry since starting work on his doctoral dissertation in 1926. I had become acquainted with Professor Fredga in the early 1960s, while I was a postdoctoral fellow and research associate at the Yale Medical School. My supervisor, Professor Henry Mautner, had spent a summer at Uppsala University and was now hosting a return visit by Professor Fredga and his associate Göran Bergson.

Fredga's talk was scheduled in the pharmacology library cum conference lunchroom and announced in the weekly Yale University Bulletin like many other seminars before. Except this time we found ourselves dealing with a massive, overflow crowd and had to move into a bigger lecture hall. This unexpectedly high interest of the Yale chemistry and biochemistry community in some aspect of selenium chemistry was puzzling until we realized that Professor Fredga also chaired the chemistry section of the Nobel Awards Committee^[2].

I remember well, how the four of us spent every remaining free minute during that visit talking about various aspects of selenium chemistry and how Fredga expressed delight to find somebody as interested in this science as he was himself. His was the first acceptance

from abroad for an opening lecture to set the theme of our untried conference plan.

Fredga's acceptance gained us further credibility to make this a truly international meeting that included his fellow Scandinavians Professor K. A. Jensen and Dr. Lars Henriksen (University of Copenhagen, Denmark), and Dr. Ulla Swanholm (University of Lund, Sweden). Professor Okamoto's contacts brought us our first Japanese contributor, Professor Noboru Sonoda (Osaka University, Japan). Professor Ralph Zingaro of Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas, USA, promised a talk on selenium-bearing organometallic species. Professor Dieter Hellwinkel (University of Heidelberg, Germany) happened to be on a sabbatical at Yeshiva University, New York, NY, and contributed a talk on hypervalent Se and Te derivatives. In the biological area our star was clearly Dr. Klaus Schwarz, (Veterans Administration Hospital, Long Beach, California) who had first demonstrated that selenium is an essential trace element. Fredga was listed as a co-author since he had supplied organoselenium compounds to be tested against selenium deficiency diseases.

From São Paulo, Brazil we managed to attract Professor Nicola Petragnani to educate us about tellurium chemistry. From Lodz, Poland, came Professor Jan Michalski with a large body of work on selenium-containing phosphorus compounds.

Eventually, a program of 23 papers had been assembled, travel and hotel arrangements made. Fortunately, all the mechanics in the arrangements of the meeting, such as mail and on-site registration, badges, program brochures, lecture room readiness, dinners and the like were being handled by the New York Academy of Sciences.

The meeting was held March 22-23, 1971 at the venerable old Waldorf Astoria Hotel. I had arrived a day early so that the committee could go over the many details, all of which seemed well in hand. Among airport pickup duties for overseas visitors, it fell upon me to welcome professor Fredga at Kennedy International Airport. Everything went smoothly, the plane arrived on time, traffic was bearable, but then his hotel room wasn't ready. So I took him to my room where he could freshen up after the long trip. We left word at the hotel check-in desk so they could keep us posted about room readiness.

Soon there was a phone call, asking if it was permissible to send another conference attendee to my room, since he was eager to meet up with Professor Fredga. That person, I believe it was Klaus Schwarz, duly came up and warm greetings ensued all around. I ordered some refreshments and the social part of the conference had been initiated. After several more calls from the front desk the place began to fill up. I had booked a normal room, never expecting that it would become a gathering and partying place for maybe 15 people, standing and sitting everywhere, all snacking and drinking and talking animatedly to each other. Into this walked my wife who had just arrived from LaGuardia airport. I can still see her startled expression at facing a crowd.

Somehow, the whole lively group ended up walking out to get some dinner. I remember the procession being led by Dan Klayman (a native New Yorker) and his guest, Professor Nikolai Zefirov of Lomonosov Moscow State University, USSR, who somehow had wrangled a sabbatical leave in the USA. Zefirov toted a heavy leather bag that he would not let out of his sight. They didn't seem to be able to make up their mind about a suitable place to eat until we ended up in a

rather unglamorous Chinese restaurant, that didn't even display a license to serve alcoholic beverages. The reason for this choice became apparent when it was revealed that Zefirov's bag contained a huge champagne bottle. The wine was chilled with commendable efficiency and served to accompany a very pleasant meal. I gather that Zefirov had never before encountered a bottle that large and just had to have it. I am still grateful to him for providing a great memory of international scientific and social cooperation.

The scientific content of the meeting should speak for itself since it is laid down in full in Volume 192 of the *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*^[3]. I believe that this was the first book-sized collection of papers dealing with selenium and tellurium chemistry after Heinrich Rheinbold's magnificent summation of the field, some 15 years earlier, that appeared as a component of the sulfur volume of Houben-Weill^[4].

All in all, the meeting must have been a considerable success in the minds of many participants since interest in a possible repeat arose very soon. But nothing happened until two years later. I was attending a liquid crystal conference in Stockholm, Sweden and had arranged to visit both Professor Fredga in Uppsala and Professor Jensen in Copenhagen, Denmark, prior to some vacation in Germany and another meeting in Hamburg.

I took the train from Stockholm to Uppsala. That was the first time I had experienced true comfort in a train ride. It was smooth travel, like flying, even the ticket was more like an airline ticket. Professor Fredga was already emeritus, he had a small laboratory all to himself, just to work up some ideas that he had never got around to trying.

During the visit he raised the question of a successor conference. He had heard that K. A. Jensen was interested in holding this in Copenhagen but nothing had been undertaken because Jensen had not been well. Fredga felt that organizing such a meeting might be a career builder for a younger person, for instance Salo Gronowitz in Lund. Since I was scheduled to see Jensen later during my trip, would I please try to dissuade him from trying to hold it in Copenhagen and put in a good word about Lund. In any case, those two cities are only separated by a body of water, a short Flygboot ride away from each other.

Jensen had contributed a chapter to the selenium book but I had never met him in person. So I was a little apprehensive about trying to manipulate him according to Fredga's suggestions. Anyhow, Copenhagen was my next stop. I stayed in a Hotel near the Tivoli amusement park, at the edge of the downtown pedestrian zone. The meeting with Jensen was at his home; I have forgotten the exact reason given, he may have been recuperating from the illness that had been mentioned by Fredga. We got on pleasantly enough but a little stiffly. He asked where I came from and where I had studied. Also, how I might have become interested in chemistry. When I was ten, my father had given me a heavy *Lehrbuch der Anorganischen Chemie* by Karl A. Hoffmann, published 1919 by Vieweg Verlag in Braunschweig. I had read it from cover to cover and I knew what I was going to be when I grew up. Somewhat facetiously, I pointed out that the author of the book that had inspired me had the same first name initials as my host. Well, that broke the ice. It turns out that Jensen greatly admired Hoffmann and had owned the same volume since his student days. The 54-year old tome was duly produced and it matched mine exactly, even

to the cracked brown binding, a product of the post-World War I depression.

With that, I had established credentials and my word carried some weight. It was really easy to bring up the subject of the next meeting and how it should ideally be held in Scandinavia. Somehow we became a committee of two, both interested in getting the job done but without necessarily wanting to do all the work. Jensen was quite aware how much effort an international meeting entailed and he reacted favorably when I inquired about the suitability of Lund as a venue and Salo Gronowitz as chairman.

By the time I left, Jensen had agreed to support a Lund meeting. All that remained for me to do was to drop Fredga a note to that effect. That completed my contribution to arranging the Second International Symposium on Organic Selenium and Tellurium Chemistry.

The Lund meeting^[5] went off very well, indeed. Professor Gronowitz, his capable program coordinator Dr. Anna-Britta Hörnfeld, and many of their students arranged for a splendid week-long conference while Mrs. Rella Gronowitz put together a fine social program. The schedule was for four days of presentations, interspersed on Wednesday with an excursion to the estate of Dag Hammarskjöld, the 1953-1961 Secretary General of the United Nations. From that trip I vividly remember animated discussions throughout the bus, a view of large expanses of peaceful meadows, and one of the finest examples of a Swedish smörgasbord that I have ever seen.

The venue for the third conference was all set when Professor Mme. Cagniant volunteered to host such an event at the University of Metz, France. I heard very little about plans for the next two years. My

own job as Manager of Organic and Polymer Chemistry research still involved some work relevant to the field but, basically, nobody at Xerox was inclined to be overly grateful to me for the kind of "academic" research this Se and Te involvement represented.

Conference planning also was not part of my job description, so any proactive efforts in this regard had to be in my own time and at my own expense. Eventually, in April 1977, the opportunity arose to follow up on the matter. My son, age 15, and I were visiting my mother who was then in a nursing home in Germany and we took the opportunity to drive to Metz. Mme. Cagniant and her husband Paul, also a chemistry professor in her department, were gracious hosts. She introduced me to the other staff, especially Dr. Gilbert Kirsch, who was to be the general secretary of the conference. We spent a long afternoon discussing many aspects of conference planning and what had been learned from the previous two events. The most confusing part was to converse in a conglomerate of English, French and German. Mme. Cagniant spoke French and a little English, Dr. Kirsch spoke native French, German in the form of both the local Alsatian dialect and northern High German, his English (initially) was less perfect. I spoke English and German and hardly any French. But we did get on fabulously and I felt assured that the meeting series would continue.

The conference proceeded as planned in July of 1979^[6]. We were honored to have Professor Sir Derek H. R. Barton serve as Honorary President. I was most flattered when Sir Derek told me that he liked my book. Liked it so much, in fact, that he had bought two copies so he wouldn't have to carry it between lab and home. A sad memory: during the conference Barton received notice and then made an announcement

to the effect that his fellow Nobel laureate Robert Burns Woodward had passed away. The mid-conference excursion led us to the caves and gardens of Moët & Chandon, the famous French champagne producers for a lavish meal of coq au vin and many varieties of champagne. Mme. Cagniant further treated the organizing committee to a 'simple' post-conference lunch that turned out to be a four-hour affair. The next day was July 14, Bastille Day, and occasion for a grand parade in the old garrison city of Metz. Dr. Kirsch had managed to get some tickets and a whole group of foreigners set off in high spirits to view the parade. Then we found out that we had been assigned space in the center of a reviewing stand, in amongst very formally dressed, uniformed and decorated ladies and gentlemen. Our casual tourist attire certainly stood out unfavorably. It was very embarrassing.

The meetings in Birmingham^[7] and Oak Ridge^[8] were held without any originating tasks on my part, but there was one more time where I played a "king-maker" role in perpetuating the series. At the end of the 1987 Oak Ridge conference, for some reason, no meeting of an executive nature had taken place and the attendees departed with no notion as to whether the series would continue. The matter was resolved in the airport cafeteria where I happened to chat with Professor Sonoda. He raised the issue by inquiring if anybody had been appointed to hold the next meeting. I responded in the negative and then asked if he would be interested. And, very simply and politely, he said: "Yes."

And so came about ICCST-6 in Osaka^[9]. Professor Sonoda introduced the ICCST acronym and the tradition that the outgoing committee hold at least one gathering to define the next step in the series, preferably by finding a volunteer to host ICCST-(n+1). The

Osaka group then accepted the venue at Aachen^[10] proposed by Professor Laur and the Aachen meeting recruited Professor Comasseto as the most recent host from São Paulo, Brazil. Peter Laur introduced the first web site mode of information dispersal, the São Paulo organizers followed suit, and we may consider internet posting as an established component.

How about the future? It is somewhat surprising that a non-organization with no membership list, no governing body and no budget has been able to hold well regarded scientific meetings over a period of some 30 years.

It occurred to me that one of the major problems for any conference organizer is to assemble a suitable mailing list for speakers and attendees. For that purpose, an up-to-date e-mail list would be wonderful resource. Consequently, I founded SeTeIG, the Selenium and Tellurium Interest Group, an internet server mail list^[11]. Basically, a mail list has a central program that simply retransmits to all members any incoming message. Membership rules for such groups vary and SeTeIG is set up as a semi-private group. That means its existence is publicly known, but membership has to be approved by the group's moderator. Any message posted to the group is immediately sent out again to the entire membership. For the purpose of organizing a conference, a list like this has great value and I hope that the ICCST series will remain alive and well for many successive events.

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