



IULTCS

In a previous article (issue 5, 2016), I mentioned that I was to attend the 34th Congress of the International Union of Leather Technologists and Chemists Societies in Chennai. I did and what a success it was! With a theme of 'sustainability' and keywords 'planet, people, profit', it typified for me the essence of IULTCS: science, technology and international networking. But then I am a committed supporter of the Union – I ought to be, I was the President in 1995 to 1997. The latter year was the centenary of the founding of the organisation which eventually turned into the Union, so the celebratory Congress was held in London. Notably, the event was held on the week after the funeral of Princess Diana, so Delegates were able to witness the aftermath, including the enormous tribute of flowers outside Westminster Abbey, just across the road from the Congress venue.

Being in India, in the midst of another Congress, caused me to reflect on my view of the Union and my relationship to it. It is the technical arm of the global leather industry and therefore the most important organisation for all of us engaged in the science and technology of leather along the international supply chain. For those who have never attended a Congress, here are some thoughts.

I first attended a Congress in 1979, in Versailles. As a newcomer to the leather industry, having joined what was then BLMRA only three years earlier, I was accompanied and shown the ropes by the then doyenne of leather R and D, the late Betty Haines. She did the job so attentively that, as she told me later, she had been asked if we were man and wife. As she was more than twenty years older, she remarked: 'I felt flattered, but I don't think you would have felt the same!' Memorably, she made a point of introducing me to the President of the Union, Mercedes Paniker, a lady universally loved and respected, but who was to almost bankrupt the Union by her international networking. I met Senora Paniker again some years later, in Spain during my term of office as President, when I was part of the lineup to be presented as she held court. She didn't remember me.

Proceedings open with the Heidemann Lecture, named for Professor Eckhart Heidemann, the most eminent leather scientist of the last quarter of the 20th century. When he was active as a researcher in Darmstadt, he organised, as a prelude to the IULTCS Congresses, what was called 'The Collagen Seminar': this was directed at protein scientists and was always well attended. After Heidemann died, the Executive of IULTCS decided the Seminar should not die with him and made it a stipulation for future organisers of Congresses that a lecture named for Heidemann should be the opening item of the technical programme.

Those of us who attended Congresses during Heidemann's time will recall that he was present at every lecture, sat in the front and was always first with a question. However one might view his actions, which could be abrupt, the benefit was the start of a discussion between the presenter and the audience. I have attended many lectures when the shade of Heidemann was missed.

Programmes vary. The mix of topics, the choice for the organisers creating the programme and the standard of the technical content in any given Congress all reflect the state of the industry worldwide at the time. Whilst I take view of how that has affected recent Congresses, the important impact is on the audiences and their continued support of the Congresses. It does seem that Congresses are becoming more parochial, less international, so the Delegate body is increasingly comprised of nationals from the country of the Congress, with fewer visitors from abroad. This is a pity, since the international nature of the Union and its Congresses has always been the element of the leather industry I have enjoyed the most and considered to be the enduring strength of the Union.

One aspect of Congresses which has changed for the good in recent years is the role of posters or 'Visual Presentations'. In the past, the Oral Presentations were all-important and the posters were a small sideshow. Now, the Visual Presentations constitute a substantial proportion of the technical programme, when displays change each day and time is set aside in the oral programme for Delegates to see and judge the displays and discuss the content with the authors. This has become

an important vehicle for scientists and technologists to publish new and preliminary work and is particularly useful for students and younger researchers. The one that caught my eye in the Indian Congress was about 'smart' leather capable of detecting hydrogen in the atmosphere – perfect for automotive upholstery or personal apparel in the new generation of hydrogen powered cars! Posters are now embedded in the technical programme, no longer the poor relation.

Congress is an opportunity for the Commissions of IULTCS to meet and conduct their business. Their number has increased from the original trio of testing Commissions, Chemical, Physical, Fastness, later together with Environment. Now, there is Research, Training, Liaison; each extending the influence of the Union and thereby contributing to the development and sustainability of our industry.

The Social Programme is an integral feature of any Congress. It is usually used to display national culture, not least of which is the food offered in the feast that is the Congress Dinner. In some Congresses, this occasion is used for a few short speeches and the giving of prizes, awards and accolades. Within these, the most prestigious is the IULTCS Merit Award for Excellence: established at the Florence Congress in 2005, it was first awarded in 2007 to Dr. Robert Sykes of UK and thereafter at each Congress up to the recipient in Chennai, Professor Dr. Mariliz Gutierrez of Brazil. For many, this glittering event is the 'icing on the cake', the best evening, held on the penultimate day and the epitome of IULTCS.

It is important that the Congresses should flourish – they are the showcases and events of excellence of the Union. Fortunately, there are always societies canvassing the Executive, eager to hold a Congress. There is always the danger that, like the Olympics, costs can exceed the income, resulting in burdensome losses for the host – this has happened in the past. However, the prestige outweighs the risk, which can be mitigated by a thought-provoking technical programme and a social programme to attract accompanying persons. We in UK managed to be successful in 1997, but it did have a seriously ageing effect on me and the other organisers!

So, notes for your diaries: 2019 Dresden, Germany, 2021 Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

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