

1st European Chemistry Congress: where science stands

Gerhard Karger

Jean-Marie Lehn et Peter Kündig, président et vice-président du Comité scientifique du 1^{er} Congrès européen de chimie (ECC1*) ont confié à Gerhard Karger de la revue *Nachrichten aus der Chemie* leurs espoirs et leurs ambitions. Le symposium de Budapest devrait être l'évènement incontournable de la communauté chimique européenne, avec un rayonnement attendu auprès des chimistes du monde entier. Cet interview, paru dans *Nachrichten aus der Chemie* de février 2006 (n° 54, p. 121), est reproduit ci-après avec son aimable autorisation.

NCh: *What makes the first European Chemistry Congress in Budapest so special compared to a traditional scientific conference, for example an annual meeting of one of the larger chemical societies?*

Jean-Marie Lehn: It's simply the fact that it is the first European one. We are in Europe, we are Europeans. I am a supranationalist, so for me it is important to translate this view into a large European meeting where everybody can meet, where the chemical societies are present and hopefully as many as possible contribute. It puts Europe as an entity on the map, in a way much like the American Chemical Society does for its region.

Peter Kündig: Yes, that's correct. It is a showcase of chemistry in Europe, a congress that defines where the frontiers are and where science is going. And it is the first time that we bring the whole chemistry community in Europe together to meet and exchange ideas.

Truly international

Fifty chemical societies are contributing. Are there so many countries in Europe?

PK: No. There are the chemical societies from 37 countries – and some have more than one. In addition there are also non-profit professional organisations that are now members of the European Association for Chemical and Molecular Sciences, the EuCheMS**. All together the fifty member societies include 150.000 scientists.

So the conference aims primarily at the European audience or do you try to attract participants from all over the world?

JML: Science has nothing to do with Europe or France or Germany or the USA or Japan. Of course we are open to everybody but it is organised by Europe, by the EuCheMS. As it stands for *Chemistry – A European Journal*: "European in spirit and international in appeal".

PK: Given the location and the organizers, the large majority of the participants will be from Europe. You will find however that about 20% of the speakers are from overseas, from Asia and North America, notably – the program will be attractive to scientists worldwide.



A showcase full of ideas

When I looked at the scientific program, I noticed that a lot of the topics are multidisciplinary and transcategorial. What were the objectives in setting up a scientific program like this?

JML: On the one hand, everybody realizes that natural science needs chemistry, which still has to develop

its core business. On the other hand, new chemistry emerges especially at the interfaces, in collaboration with physics and biology. Such interface work becomes more and more important. So the program reflects these developments.

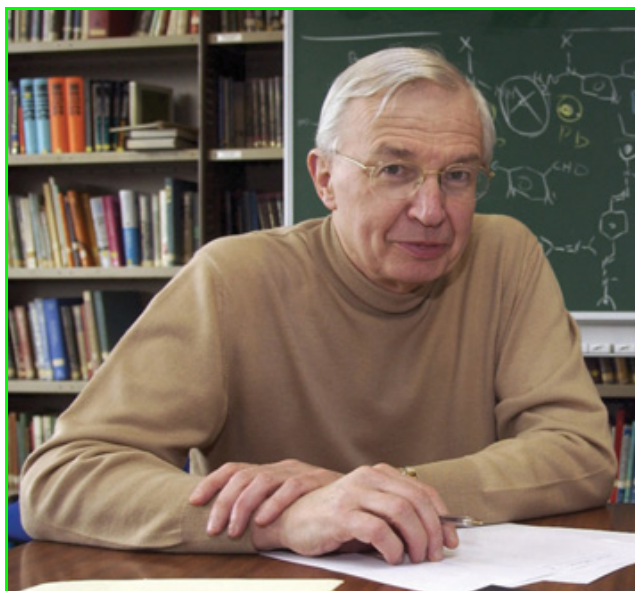
PK: Yes, frontier-science is often interdisciplinary and the program reflects this. Topics chosen were those that are very promising right now, where new knowledge is generated fast. The symposia span a very large body of chemistry and scientists will be attracted to several different symposia that fall within their areas of interest.

JML: A meeting does not impose trends on the scientific community. It is the scientists at work that show the trends. Of course a symposium should also show directions, make clear that we as chemists have to look at the developments of our own field, of our own science into other areas, which we can benefit from.

Europe is still one of the world leaders in chemicals production. How does your program address scientists working in industry? Are there special topics for industrial chemists? Or will they find interesting topics in any event?

PK: There are a number of topics with strong involvement from industry. These are the symposia with strong components of applied science, of course, such as "Chemistry, Food and Health", "Green & Sustainable Chemistry & Processes", and "Novel Multifunctional Ligands in Coordination Chemistry". There is also "New Frontiers in Medicinal Chemistry", where all lecturers come from industry with a host of exciting topics.

The majority of the speakers at the congress are from academia, that's true, but that is often also where first new discoveries are made and where scientists are eager to talk about them and discuss. Hot results in industry labs are often kept under wraps for some time.



Jean-Marie Lehn.

We are confident that the congress finds much resonance from scientists in industry.

The conveners of the 17 symposia have done an outstanding job in putting together a first-class program. It was a pleasure to help initiate it and then to coordinate the symposia.

JML: And furthermore as you pointed out Europe is still a major centre for the production of chemicals, in fact the only company which has the courage to call itself chemical company is in Europe. At some stage we talked about trying to get chemical engineering into the program.

PK: At this first congress we cannot cover all areas in chemistry and neither do we claim this.

Any other restrictions?

PK: Conference overlap is a problem. It is impossible to avoid that. Electrochemists have their congress in the same week in Edinburgh. This is an important area that we had to drop and that hopefully can be included at a future congress. There, an enlargement of the science base can be planned in.

JML: You can't make it too big because otherwise you would have to deal with 50.000 people coming around. And you will find no city which will house them except maybe an equivalent of Las Vegas.

So the congress will be a showcase for certain areas of chemistry.

JML: It has to be a showcase but it also has to be productive in terms of giving you ideas to the people who attend. The congress should provide a real chance for communication, interaction, starting new things. We want people to arrive and to leave with new ideas and projects.

Will there be enough time to make friends and enough networking opportunities as well? The scientific program seems to be really packed, full of sessions and lectures.

PK: The program is quite dense and that is unavoidable. Nevertheless, much care has gone into arranging the symposia to fit together harmoniously. Thus, someone

involved in material research may find the symposia "Frontiers in Supramolecular Chemistry", "Materials & Nanomaterials for Devices", and "Polymer Architecture-From Structure to Functional Control" of interest and he/she will find them arranged in the program with minimal overlap. There will then also be enough time to discuss with colleagues. Likewise, an organic chemist may start on Monday/Tuesday with the session on Catalysis, or with the lectures in Medicinal Chemistry and on Wednesday go to the lectures in Green Chemistry or participate in the Organic Synthesis symposium. These are just a couple of examples and the process can be carried out for the multitude of areas that together make up the field of chemistry and molecular science. In between, this also leaves time to listen to the Nobel laureates and discuss with other participants. The poster sessions are a great opportunity to do just this. The fact that the congress is held at a single site also greatly favours interaction.

JML: And people will see each other at coffee breaks and in the evenings. This is the way it works.

PK: In addition to the lectures we do have extensive poster sessions in all areas, we have social events, we have mixing places, we have discussion groups and satellite events that go beyond the symposia that we were in charge of coordinating.

No system of quotas in science

What about young chemists travelling to Budapest? Who will provide grants?

PK: Several chemical societies are willing to financially support younger colleagues, for instance the GDCh with grants from the Karl-Ziegler Foundation. The response of course has to come from the member societies, because up to now EuCheMS does not have its own budget.

JML: That is something important for the future. We have to find ways of establishing a continuous support...

PK: ... and to make sure, as it is done for this 1st congress, that young scientists benefit from low participation fees and that accommodation also is affordable. With housing costs of 22 Euro including breakfast and many low-cost airlines flying to Budapest, the total budget does not need to be very high.

That brings me back to another question. If I look at the distribution of the members of the scientific committee it seems to be less equilibrated in terms of the EU enlargement and countries of the former Eastern block.

PK: Correct. It reflects probably where frontier-science is located today. This is bound to change in the years to come.

But with Budapest as venue, the colleagues from the former Eastern block should have the chance to present their work.

JML: Sure. We have tried to take that into account. There are quite a few opportunities to present papers and posters. It's up to every colleague to find a way to present his or her work. That the congress will be held in Budapest can be explained simply by the fact that there were people willing to organise it, which was crucial. And it was a way to recognise that we are now one Europe, together with the countries of the former Eastern bloc. And moreover, there is a lot of remarkable science going on in these countries.

There are very good universities, very good laboratories and a very good education. Frankly, I think that the people we get as postdocs from there are extremely well trained. There is



Ernst Peter Kündig.

still strong classical training which means much more better chemists on the bench than those who prefer to speak about mechanisms (*laughs*).

PK: Of course we were aware that we have to have a balance with respect to topics, geography, gender, age, industry, academia, etc. The symposia chairs did their best but the foremost criterion was quality and the other considerations, while important, come second. One cannot just play on numbers. You cannot have a system of quotas in science. The program that we have now is excellent in terms of science but only fair to good on the other criteria. There is room for improvement in future meetings. Of course, the selection of oral communications will also change the picture.

Another step forward

Harry Kroto said that the congress was long overdue. Do you agree to that? Is the Europe of chemistry marching

forward with the congress? Will there be follow up meetings?

JML: First of all, the European chemical societies have already gone a long way by getting some of their primary journals together. I was quite amazed that the societies accepted to renounce to journals which had a long tradition for building up a new system. I would put it in parallel with the Germans letting the Mark go, the French the Franc, the Italians the Lira and so on.

PK: Yes, it is very impressive. All these undertakings have to overcome entropy – and a chemist knows that this is not easy. So the first EuCheMS congress is intended to become another milestone in the creation of a more coherent chemical community in Europe. This is also a necessity because we need to have a united voice in Brussels. Otherwise chemistry will simply be bypassed.

Since you asked the question: yes, we will have a second EuCheMS congress. This is actually already in the planning stage and it will be held in Torino in September 2008 but for now, we have to focus on the 2006 event and make it a success.

So let's keep our fingers crossed.

JML: All of us very much hope that the 1st European Chemistry Congress will be the first in a long series, that it will provide ground for all chemists in Europe but also for those coming from all over the world. I am sure that there will be more and more coming from other places, other continents. Maybe we should also do one more thing. There is one continent which is forgotten. It is Africa. We should also think about bringing in African chemists. This is of course more difficult than in the case of the countries of the former Eastern bloc. But I think African chemists would be very important. Not to overlook this big continent any longer, simply because there are some places in Africa where good chemistry is going on and we have to help African chemists to develop.

This is probably another story.

JML: Indeed. But if one talks about equal opportunities, one should keep in mind that there is this continent which is not so privileged as ours.

*www.euchems-budapest2006.hu

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