

IFLA: From Turmoil to Turmoil: based on an interview with Hans-Peter Geh

Hans-Peter Geh, President of IFLA from 1985 to 1991, talks to Laverne Carroll about his time in office and his views on international librarianship.

Frances Laverne Carroll

From 1985–1991, Hans-Peter Geh, Director, Württembergische Landesbibliothek (the State Library of Württemberg, Germany) was President of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), located in The Hague, Netherlands. Dr. Geh is currently president of the European Foundation for Library Cooperation. We agreed on the title above, but began the interview on April 28, 1994, in his office at the library in Stuttgart, with the thought it might have the title, 'IFLA: From Small to Large', because he was involved in the movement to have the library schools become members of the IFLA as institutions. The name change of IFLA, which did not change the acronym, was accomplished in 1976 when the new statutes of IFLA were approved.

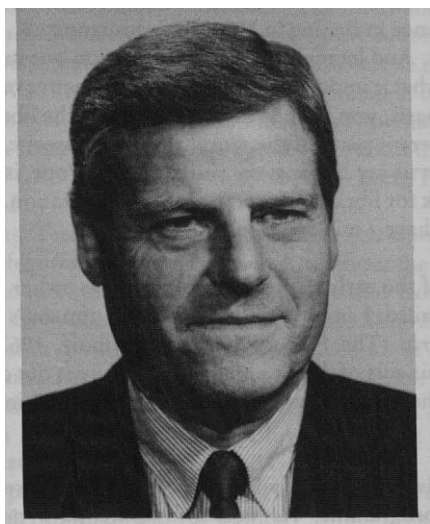


Figure 1. Hans-Peter Geh.

I first met Dr. Geh in Frankfurt in 1968 during a tour of all the library schools in Germany as part of my course work for the doctoral degree. He was head of the library school of the University of Frankfurt. How he arrived at that position is rather interesting:

G: Yes, beginning 1962, having studied in England at the University of Bristol for some time, I was already very much

interested in international affairs. When I wrote my doctor's thesis on medieval English history, the subject specialist at the university library in Frankfurt was extremely helpful. So one day he telephoned me and asked me to come to the library. When I arrived, he said that the director would like a word with me. I met Dr. Köttelwesch, the Director, who asked me straight away to tell him the story of my life. After five minutes, he interrupted me and said, 'I hire you'. 'What for?' 'My subject specialist for history and political science is going from the library and you should become his successor'. I told him that I had already applied for the School of Diplomacy in Bonn and got a positive answer. But Dr. Köttelwesch insisted by saying 'Librarianship is good for you!'.

I was immediately accepted as a subject specialist, and then, of course, I got the library training: one year in Frankfurt at the university library and one year at the library school in Cologne. After that I was not only responsible for the history and political science collection but also for the circulation department and a little later for the library school as well. You can imagine that I had lots to do.

In January 1970 I was appointed Director of the Württembergische Landesbibliothek and head of the library school at Baden-Württemberg.

C: When I met you in 1968 in Frankfurt, it was the summer IFLA was to meet in Frankfurt; and I saw you again, very much involved in the IFLA meeting which was held in the university library. It was my first IFLA conference, and I was an observer, having rather thoroughly researched the history of IFLA before attending but feeling lucky to be in the university library again and seeing someone I knew, who seemed very important as the conference proceedings progressed that week.

G: Yes, my work for the IFLA conference in Frankfurt in 1968 began in 1966. There was an IFLA conference in Scheveningen in the Netherlands, and I went there and had a look around in which way such a conference was organized. There I met Margreet Wijnstroom, then General Secretary of the (Dutch) Central Association of Public Libraries, who became Secretary General of IFLA in 1971. Sir Frank Francis, Principal Librarian of the British Museum, London, was the President. I also had the opportunity to attend two Executive Board meetings in 1967; one in London in the spring and the other in Copenhagen in the fall.

It was interesting at that time to me to listen to what they discussed and in which way they discussed the relevant matters. They did not have such a full agenda as we had later. I had a job already during these two conferences. Mrs. Margarita Rudomino, a Vice President of IFLA, Director of the All-Union State Library of Foreign Literature, Moscow, and the Soviet member of the Executive Board, had not a very good understanding of English. So I translated for her from English into German, a language she was familiar with because her mother was a teacher in German. I also helped her to find jazz records for her son who was a jazz pianist; it was easier in Western countries where she travelled to get them than in the Socialist countries.

Then we organized the conference of IFLA in Frankfurt in 1968, and it started already with a political problem. It was that the people from the German Democratic Republic did

not accept the name 'Germany' on their badges. It was a rule at that time that the English name Germany was accepted within IFLA circles. The East Germans made a big fuss about it when they arrived. They crossed out the name Germany and wrote down DDR. I had a lot of difficulties because our federal government had given us a certain amount of money for the conference only under the condition that this denotement 'Germany' was kept.

It was at this point that Dr. Geh and I agreed that the article would perhaps be better entitled, 'IFLA: From Turmoil to Turmoil', because there was also the incident of the invasion of Czechoslovakia during that week of the conference.

G: Why not, yes; behind the scenes a lot happens before a conference and that was the first one which my director said, 'You settle it'. You know what happened in the middle of the week?

C: Yes, I quoted Herman Liebaers, Preben Kirkegaard, and Francis on that in a previous article.¹

G: I only want to add that we did a lot for the delegates from Czechoslovakia who wanted to stay until the situation had settled in their country. We collected money to help them, but many of them lost their position after that. That was my start in IFLA.

C: Has your service in IFLA been continuous?

To this question he said, 'Yes', and recounted that he had become a member of the Standing Committee of the Section of Library Schools, as it was called then, and in 1977 became the chairperson of that section and at the same time the chairperson of the division. In 1979, he was an ex officio member of the Executive Board because he was chairperson of the Professional Board and served in that position until 1981.

That was twelve years, and you can imagine that a lot happened in that time,

Dr. Geh continued, saying he was elected a member of the Executive Board in Leipzig in 1981.

G: Leipzig was a difficult time for me because something similar happened as in 1968. According to the Communist organizers, the former Germany consisted of three parts: the German Democratic Republic, the Federal Republic of Germany, and West Berlin. For this reason the delegates from West Berlin had this denoted on their badges, which they crossed out and wrote 'Germany' instead. I was asked by the Communist party representatives about this and told them the story of what happened in Frankfurt. We settled the question, but it was all rather difficult. What my position in IFLA right from the beginning has been – keep out of politics as much as possible.

C: You and your wife have been quite a striking duo at IFLA conferences. I think Sir Frank and Lady Francis, whom I met in Frankfurt and later interviewed in their retirement home, The Vine in Nether Winchendon, England, made a comparable team.

G: Yes, and I think that is an important point. For us it was a very

natural thing – my wife is also a librarian. The first meeting as president of IFLA was in Japan, and we shared the study to learn about the culture and literature of the country. I like to do this before each conference. My wife was also happy to be a gracious hostess to many people during the conferences.

There are at least two perennial issues discussed concerning IFLA: annual meetings and closed meetings. We know there is a lot of work and a lot of money involved in having annual meetings, but we always come to the same conclusion, and I believe until the anniversary conference in 2002 in Edinburgh, we will have annual meetings.

About an open meeting of the Executive Board, it seems to me not possible; that is really where IFLA policy is discussed and decided. In Executive Board meetings there is a necessity at times to be very outspoken in order to reconcile opinions before the final decision. In open meetings there would be the hazard that the first round of discussion would be reported as policy. On a national basis you can do things like that because people very often know the background and have general information about what is going on. We in Germany do have sometimes an open meeting of steering bodies following a closed meeting to open lines of communication while a policy decision is still being discussed and determined.

C: Do you believe librarianship is an international phenomenon?

G: Absolutely. In these days when the world has become so small libraries have to cooperate across borders for many reasons. In addition, related international organizations must have closer cooperation. I therefore suggested already during my presidency that IFLA and FID [International Federation for Information and Documentation, The Hague] should have a joint conference in Beijing in 1996. But unfortunately, this will not happen. And let me add in this connection one more aspect. I think what is important, if you want to be active on an international basis, you have to know a lot about the librarianship in the different parts of the world. I think someone who knows only, let us say Europe, the situation in Europe, is not entitled to speak for librarianship as a global organization. IFLA must always have a mind to think globally.

C: Some of the early planning for IFLA was rather prescriptive and detailed. I am thinking of Gustav Hofmann's *Libraries in the World* (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1963). Do you think this sort of developmental procedure is out of style now or do the medium-term programmes initiated in 1975 serve well?

G: I have always said that what we need is a rather precise professional programme. As you know, we have now got the Medium-Term Programme (the current one is 1992–1997) and a long-term programme. Such a document was discussed in the Executive Board in 1990 and 1991 and accepted at the Council meeting in Moscow in 1991 as the Long Term Policy [see box]. In it we singled out the items that were important to the members of the Executive Board. I consider it my bequest to IFLA when I left as President in Moscow.

C: The idea of core programmes started about twenty years ago. There are five of them now: UBCIM (Universal Bibliographic Control and International MARC); UAP (Universal

EXTRACTS FROM IFLA'S LONG TERM POLICY

IFLA's Role and Mission

IFLA is an independent professional international federation, without profit motive whose purpose is to promote international understanding, cooperation, discussion, research and development in all fields of library activity, including bibliography, information services, document delivery, and the education of personnel. As a non-governmental organization, IFLA provides a body through which worldwide librarianship can be represented in matters of international interest. In pursuing its objectives, IFLA supports the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that 'everyone has the right to participate freely in the culture of the community, to enjoy the arts, and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits' (Art. 27).

In fulfilling its mission, the Federation focuses its attention on

- broadening access to and availability of information to users worldwide
- stimulating the development of the profession
- supporting the growth and expansion of libraries
- extending the range and variety of information resources available through libraries.

IFLA's Long Term Policy

IFLA's Long Term Policy aims to support the role and mission of the Federation: to advance the leadership role of its members for the benefit of society and to create a visionary framework for the development of the library profession. The international library profession requires a clear indication for future action, a strategic plan to ensure that the profession knows where it is going and why. IFLA's Long Term Policy is formulated both for its members as well as for the Federation itself to enable them to establish its strategy, plans and programs that affect the next 10 to 15 years. IFLA's operational plans, based on Long Term Policy, are reflected in its Medium-Term Programme.

The Long Term Policy is based on the assumption that the library profession has common goals throughout the entire community; the level of its development may differ from region to region and from country to country because libraries and librarians operate in specific and distinct social, economic and political environments. There are, however, common concerns which all professionals and institutions share. IFLA's Long Term Policy focuses on such concerns while allowing varying methods of implementation, depending on local circumstances.

The purpose of this document is to enumerate the different issues which call for a policy response.

Role of Libraries

Libraries, as major components of the information field, have witnessed major changes during the past two decades. Information has become one of the key elements in contemporary social and economic life. The increasing involvement of the information industry, including publishers and brokers, in information

processing and document delivery, as well as the application of modern information technology and telecommunications, has created a new information environment in which libraries are one of the multiple partners in the information transfer chain. Library institutions must provide facilities for all users to access their collections both through traditional and electronic media for all users, thus remaining the primary source of information.

Libraries also have a central role in society as cultural and educational institutions, and as agents for promoting literacy. IFLA considers books and libraries, as well as the promotion of the reading habit, essential for better international understanding, and as such they are a fundamental precondition for peace, human rights, literacy, intellectual freedom, and a better environment for all peoples.

General Policy Issues

The monitoring of the library profession worldwide as well as observations of trends which forecast the nature and function of libraries in the coming decades have resulted in the following list of issues which require policy consideration:

- the role of libraries in the cultural and social dimension of society including their mission in the fight against illiteracy
- provide and protect the right of every individual to have access to needed information
- strengthening the ability of the individual to make mature, responsible decisions
- the development of libraries in order to bridge the information gap between the information rich and the information poor
- intellectual freedom including the protection of library materials and personnel from censorship
- the growth of the worldwide information market and the recognition of information as a commodity
- the improvement of the status of the profession, including education and professional development: rights and obligations of library personnel; and the development of effective professional associations
- IFLA's leading and catalytic role among library institutions and associations
- influencing the development and application of new information technology and telecommunications, especially those information tools, technologies and standards which assist librarians in providing services responsive to changing needs.

The above-mentioned policy issues can be grouped under four headings which form the main subjects of IFLA's Long Term Policy:

- Promotion of the cultural, educational, and social role of libraries in society
- Improvement of access to and availability of information
- Enhancement of the library profession
- Influencing the development and application of information technology and telecommunications.

Availability of Publications); PAC (Preservation and Conservation); UDT (Universal Dataflow and Telecommunication); and ALP (Advancement of Librarianship in the Third World). Any comments?

G: IFLA in my eyes is a purely professional organization and therefore we have to take up all matters which are of importance for librarianship worldwide. The core programmes are essential in this connection as they deal with matters which are of the utmost importance to global librarianship. And they are most successful as they are linked to big national libraries and their programmes are executed by very qualified staff. And moreover the host institutions contribute a lot of financial assistance to the programmes. But of course it is important that the core programmes collaborate very closely with the work done in the relevant Sections in order to avoid overlap which IFLA, due to restricted financial resources, cannot afford.

C: If we come full circle in our exchange today, how do the library schools fit into IFLA?

G: I think that library education is always the connective. IFLA puts library education in touch with specialists from libraries. Librarians today should be highly qualified, very flexible, open-minded, and take a lot of initiative. I think we live in a critical but very exciting situation. I see it in many of the discussions: statements like 'a library without walls or books'; 'the library simply as a relay station', only providing information. I am in favour of a 'virtual library of the world', but each library in itself should not only be a well-equipped information centre but also a cultural and communication centre. This is important for the future role of libraries, and this role is also accepted by politicians, at least in my country.

We librarians should be information navigators but should also have a role with regard to quality control of information. The flood of information is getting bigger and bigger and the dangers are, of course, the computers. It is so easy to put something, a piece of information, into the computer. It is much more quickly done and cheaper than making a printed version. But what the user needs is qualified and specialized information which should be prepared for him by the librarian.

The second point is that information today has become a commodity with a price. We unfortunately can no longer provide everything free of charge, having the costs of networks in mind.

C: Children should.

G: Yes, no doubt about that. I would like to see libraries as an integral part of the education of children. And certainly information should be available to everyone at a reasonable price.

The third matter is channelling and evaluating the information for people which arises from their request. The users want to know which piece of information is best for their topic. These are related aspects and need constant discussion and cooperation to make significant statements about our profession in the future and we should use every opportunity to reach the many potential users that are yet available to serve.

The membership is bigger, and IFLA is really a global

organization. What thrills me is the enthusiasm and engagement of the participants at conferences and seminars. I think that especially the professional side of IFLA is much changed for the better. There is lots of excellent work being done, and I think in IFLA in regards to these Council meetings, everybody tries to understand the position of a colleague in a different part of the world; and my impression is that, importantly, the representatives try to come to an agreement or at least they reach a compromise. I think this atmosphere in IFLA is most important. There are organizations in which the fighting within or between countries is carried on into the meetings, but this is not so for IFLA.

C: IFLA is an organization where the people work as representatives of the profession, not as politicians.

G: Yes, I quite agree. IFLA is a non-governmental organization whose members are professionals interested in international cooperation. I never got the impression that they were representatives of their countries with a mission to fulfil. The same is true for the steering bodies. I always enjoyed very much the discussions among colleagues and friends wherever they came from. We had quite often the same ideas and were always interested in achieving good results with regard to our professional goals. And finally I think that IFLA's activities contribute a lot to international understanding and friendships around the globe.

C: Now, coming to the IFLA conferences today. Everybody knows how difficult the political situation is today. Were there any difficulties in deciding to hold this year's IFLA conference in Cuba?

G: When we had in mind to have an IFLA conference in Latin America, because we had IFLA conferences in Asia and one in Africa, in Kenya, we decided to have one as soon as possible in Latin America. We travelled around in these countries and then Cuba offered the invitation. We said to our Latin American colleagues, 'Do you agree?' 'Oh, yes', they said; it was okay. Therefore, Cuba was accepted on condition that representatives from all member countries could go there.

In 1995, it is Turkey. I think it will be a most interesting conference. You know they have a great culture and tradition. I have visited quite a few libraries there and I always admired their excellent collections, especially the precious manuscripts which are pieces of great art. I therefore think it will be a wonderful experience for all those visiting this most impressive country at the doorstep from Europe to Asia. Unless the situation in the Middle East worsens, we should have no problem in Istanbul. The dates are August 20-26, 1995, and the theme is Libraries of the Future.

As far as 1996 is concerned, we got an invitation from China. We discussed it in every detail before we accepted as there was a political problem involved. The people in Beijing say that there is only one China and therefore only one national library. We accepted one China, but what we could not agree upon was changing names of relevant institutions in Taiwan like that of the National Central Library, Taipei. They want us to change the name in the conference registration. Now a representative of China is on the Executive Board of IFLA, elected in Barcelona in 1993, this question will be

settled, I'm sure, more easily.

I think that the IFLA conference in China is very important. China has a lot to offer in our fields, has an impressive new national library building and very well-qualified colleagues who will host the meeting. And above all I was always very much impressed travelling there by the great culture of that huge country. Therefore I did everything I could to get China accepted as the venue for the IFLA conference in 1996. The theme is *The Challenge of Change: Libraries and Economic Development*.

In the past, the problem was South Africa and the attendance of their librarians at IFLA meetings. With the recent good reports of improvements and the recent elections, Dr. Geh said he thought there would not be a problem now. It is interesting to report in this connection that in Barcelona a South African was elected a member of the Professional Board.

C: Have you attended the IFLA conferences since Moscow? And do you intend to go to those in the future? They may seem a bit tame after Moscow and the turmoil of that week.

G: Of course I have attended IFLA conferences since Moscow and I will go to the future IFLA meetings as IFLA means a lot to me.

But the Moscow conference, my last one as President, will always remain in my mind. Early in the morning of 19 August, the day of the official opening of the conference, I was informed about the coup. The first thing was to contact the Secretary General of IFLA to discuss the situation. We

immediately decided to drive to the Ministry of Culture and to talk to the Minister. When we arrived there the ministry was like a haunted house. The Minister, whom I had met on several of my visits, received us and we discussed the situation quite frankly. He asked me whether I would stick to my Presidential Address, full of quotations from Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and others on liberty and freedom of opinion, and so on. I replied, 'of course, I do'. And he promised to do the same, to read his open-minded speech.

After we had got the information that the leader of the coup, who was to open the conference, would not come, and after the assurance that he would guarantee the safety of the participants, we left the Ministry and drove to Red Square, where the Russia Hotel is situated and where the conference was to be opened that afternoon. Everything was quiet there, but on leaving Red Square we saw the tanks rolling to the Kremlin.

The opening took place as scheduled and after it I chaired a crowded press conference where I made IFLA's position quite clear. After this, some people came up to me saying that I was perhaps too outspoken and could get into difficulties.

A day later some pressure was put on me from delegations to stop the conference. The Secretary General and I decided that everybody was free to leave Moscow but that we would proceed with the conference as scheduled. There were several reasons for this decision: with the exception of the office of president, there had not been any elections for chairpersons of Sections, Divisions or the Professional Board. Stopping the conference, therefore, would have been disastrous to IFLA's professional work and to the Soviet organizers.



Figure 2. *Happiness after the coup: at the IFLA reception in the Kremlin, Moscow, 1991.*

On Tuesday night I drafted a press release which was discussed and accepted on Wednesday morning by the Executive Board. It read as follows:

STATEMENT FROM THE PRESIDENT OF IFLA, DR. HANS-PETER GEH

'Events of the past several days have made it impossible for the 57th IFLA Council and General Conference to proceed normally.

Uncertainties about personal security, limitations on access to information, and disruptions of transportation to and from the conference site have become major obstacles to the work of IFLA in Moscow and have prompted the early departure of a number of participants.

We regret that despite the prodigious efforts of our Soviet colleagues to host a splendid conference, the current situation has forced us to modify the remaining conference schedule.'

Later, on behalf of the Executive Board, I made the following statement at the reception in the Kremlin:

'We sincerely hope that the Soviet Union will adhere to the democratic development recognizing freedom of the people, freedom of opinion, human rights and peace in all the republics according to the principles adopted by the United Nations.

We wish the Soviet people all the best right now in this difficult period and for the future. We foreign librarians stand behind our Soviet colleagues and thank them wholeheartedly for their great hospitality and friendship.

May the main objectives of IFLA, namely international understanding and close international cooperation in all fields of librarianship, be strongly supported by the Soviet union now and in the years to come.'

I shall never forget the feeling when the coup was over that day because our Russian delegates and colleagues were elated and appreciated that we were staying on. It was what I called

a victory for freedom of opinion and for democracy in the Soviet Union and also an important event for global librarianship. My guiding principles – fully supported by the Secretary General – were to take the right decisions for IFLA and for the future of librarianship in Russia.

C: Your final day in the office of the presidency of IFLA, Friday, the 23rd of August, 1991, on the last day of the IFLA conference in Moscow, was memorable to say the least. Are you still involved in IFLA?

G: Not in an official capacity because IFLA is different from some other organizations in that policy. The connection is immediately over officially when the new president takes over at the end of the conference. That is why it is so important to have experience in the professional work of IFLA and the Executive Board before being elected to the presidency. I can be asked on occasion for some comments, of course. It was a great privilege to serve IFLA in many positions and this international work was most important for my life.

References

1. Carroll, Frances Laverne. Some Impressions of Former Presidents of IFLA 1963–79: Francis, Liebaers and Kirkegaard. *International Library Review*, 18 (1986) 147–152.

Abstract

Text of an interview with Hans-Peter Geh, President of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 1985-1991, about his experiences as President and his views on international librarianship.

Frances Laverne Carroll is Professor Emeritus, School of Library and Information Studies, University of Oklahoma, 125 Page Street, Norman, Oklahoma 73069, USA.