

History of the IFP 1988 – 1998

It is possible to consider an organisation like the IFP as if it were a living body – rushing through periods of unrestrained growth, marking time or growing in a more orderly fashion. The image of the tree might be an apposite one. Those in positions of responsibility have the job of tending this tree and nurturing it for an allotted span of time, which, in the case of my presidency, was ten years. I sometimes wonder how those ten years will eventually go down in history: perhaps as the “years of the new era” in the decade following the fall of the Berlin Wall?

Even before this new political era came into being, my predecessor, Finn Magnussen, had managed to create a certain opening towards the states behind the Iron Curtain. We succeeded in building further on these relationships and in developing them in a formal manner too. One clear practical outcome is probably to be seen in the fact that a specialist representative from the former German Democratic Republic, Prof. Michael Geyer of Leipzig, worked shoulder-to-shoulder with us for a number of years as General Secretary. Along with Artur Trenkel, who served as Treasurer for many years, the three of us formed the nucleus of the Board. Traditionally, the IF(M)P had stood for the interests of *Western* European countries, but what had to be done at that particular point in time was to attract new groups of entirely different countries. One of the prerequisites for that to become possible was to amend the **Statutes** or, to remain with the image of the tree, to prune away all unnecessary shoots and to encourage fresh growth. It astonished us when we realised that the old Statutes had remained virtually unamended since the IFP was re-created after the Second World War; at least they seemed to have remained intact since 1958. The first step was to ask the member societies to communicate their ideas and needs to us. This was followed by meticulous work on points of detail in the various official bodies of the IFP, in particular on the Executive Board, as it was called at the time (nowadays simply: “Board”), and on the Enlarged Board, which was later to become the “Council”. At this stage, a draft was circulated to the members and a debate and preliminary vote took place during the General Assembly held in Hanover in September 1991. The extensive consultation of all the member societies culminated in a “write-in vote” in 1993, through which the revised Statutes were accepted with a broad measure of support.

Apart from the structures, the simplified processing of membership and a number of other matters, the IFP’s **goals** were reformulated:

“The IFP is an international inter-professional cross-cultural federation. The IFP does not pursue profession-oriented politics. The goal of the IFP is to facilitate and promote international communication among the various schools, professional groups and cultures within psychotherapy. The IFP encourages and supports development within psychotherapy corresponding to the specific requirements and necessities of the various continents, regions and cultures.”

These general goals were then reformulated with greater precision in more operational language and checked as to the practical feasibility of implementing them. They, too, enjoyed broadly-based support, although individual advocates of the former structure had considerable difficulty in accepting the new emphasis on inter-professionalism. However, there was no denying the fact that particularly in the countries of Eastern Europe, but also in countries on the other continents, medical practitioners had long since ceased to be the only grouping active in psychotherapy and that various other members of the health-care professions were also actively involved and, as such, were consequently members of their national societies. In tune with this, the IFP changed and simplified its name from the old form of “International Federation for *Medical* Psychotherapy” to the new form of “International Federation for Psychotherapy”.

The actual leadership of the reshaped federation was vested in the hands of the newly defined Board, which had two new members as of 1994: Wolfgang Senf as General Secretary and Ulrich Schnyder as Treasurer. We formed a dedicated, small team that met together several times a year. It is a good testimonial of their commitment to the IFP that both my colleagues were subsequently elected President of the organisation by the Council to which we were answerable. Apart from the rather radical pruning of the “IFP tree” through the reforms of the Statutes and structures, various other activities took place, either pre-empting this new direction or implementing it:

- The contacts with the countries of **Eastern Europe** were intensified. It was arranged for experienced teachers of psychotherapy from various teaching institutions to be put in touch on a voluntary basis with the regional centres and to support them in organising key regional or national congresses;
- New attempts were launched to establish closer relations with countries **outside of Europe**. Repeatedly, it was confirmed that this could only be done successfully if the necessary “pacesetters” were in place;
- One example of this was when the traditionally Euro-centric federation first held out its hand to **Asia**, where the colleagues working in Seoul, South Korea, around Prof. Dongshick Rhee, a true doyen of the profession, organised the impressive and successful Sixteenth International IFP Congress in 1994 on the theme of “Psychotherapy: East & West (Integration of Psychotherapy)”. It was a genuinely trans-cultural encounter, which had a durably enriching impact, particularly on those of us from Europe. For the region itself, it was the cradle of the regional organisation which was given due form later on and called APAP (an Asian-Pacific chapter of IFP), as if the “IFP tree” had spouted a new bough. Not long after, in 1996, APAP went on to organise its first regional conference in Bali, Indonesia;
- In the case of **Africa**, it was Prof. Peter Ebigbo of Enugu, Nigeria, who had trained in Europe and who was doing a really dedicated job of work in a newly-formed psychotherapy centre, who set about building up a network with colleagues in several African countries. The biggest obstacle to his endeavours to form an “African chapter of IFP” was the paucity of available financial resources. Only a few colleagues from other countries had adequate travel budgets. Despite that, his first regional conference turned out to be a success, and even the national minister of health contributed in person!
- Our long-standing Board member and Vice-President, Prof. Mauricio Knobel, set about establishing a chapter in **South America** and found himself confronted with similar difficulties. Nonetheless, a regional conference was staged in Belem do Para, Brazil, with the support of the IFP and organised by our Council member, Prof. Jayme Benarros;
- Finally, the “IFP tree”, cultivated by our colleagues in **Europe**, spouted another branch, culminating in 1998 when our **Polish** colleagues organised the Seventeenth World Congress in Warsaw on the subject of “Psychotherapy at the Turn of the Century – from Past to Future” with an impressive number of participants from *Eastern* Europe. With their choice of title, Prof. Maria Siwiak-Kobayashi and her colleagues set a veritable challenge to all members of our guild.

Not everything that the IFP as an organisation set out to do in those ten years turned out to be a success. The resources (both in terms of finances and personnel) were too tight, and our plans were not always practicable. We are still missing a broad representation of the Mediterranean countries within the IFP. Some of Europe’s national societies had already withdrawn by that time. Despite our efforts, we failed to find an adequate partnership in the USA. Today, many psychotherapists are not really bothered about joining a national or regional body and are much more committed to specialist societies following a particular school. Finally, especially within the European Union, the definition of the profession became more and more politicised, which led to new organisations, including some in competition with the IFP.

Despite all these critical reflections, the IFP has managed to become an element in a broad network. In today’s parlance, presumably “globalisation” would be the apposite term for the

breadth of its activities. That made it natural for us to try and establish **partnerships** with other **umbrella organisations** with a similar direction to ourselves. To list just the most important:

- SEPI, the Society for Exploration of Psychotherapy Integration, has the objective, reflected in its name, of integrating psychotherapy across various schools and methods;
- SPR, the Society for Psychotherapy Research, is the organisation which in many respects does the scientific spadework for specialist orientations to emerge later;
- WHO, the World Health Organisation, created a conference of the presidents of the astonishingly numerous umbrella organisations that are active in the field of mental health.

Today, the IFP ensures that there are regular exchanges with these organisations (and others too), and in some cases has even closer ties through individuals who serve as board members for other organisations as well. The “IFP tree” is thus not the only vegetation adorning the psycho landscape, but it is playing its part in forming a cluster whose common desire is to afford assistance to the many people whose sense of psychic wellbeing is severely buffeted in the storms – and even gales – that living within a society causes for them.

All these activities included many enriching meetings with other people. It is these that made the office-holders feel their voluntary endeavours were worthwhile, particularly when the attendant circumstances were frustrating or even hostile.

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