GROUPE DE RECHERCHE SUR L'ALCOOL ET LES PHARMACODÉPENDANCES

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By Stylianos Nicolaidis

The European Winter Conference on Brain Research was first born in my mind in 1973 inspired by is US predecessor. I was spending my sabbatical year as Visiting Professor at the University of Pennsylvania working both at the Biology Department with Alan Epstein and as a neurosurgeon with Thomas Langfitt. I was invited to give a talk at the WCBR in Veil (Co), the famous ski resort. As a ski-lover I thought: “Oh, these Americans have fantastic ideas. Why not? But, can one ski and at the same time effectively attend working sessions?”

To my astonishment, I found out that the physical fatigue from skiing did not prevent me from being alert during both morning and evening sessions. I also made several good friends that I have kept to this day.

Then came the inspiration: Why not do the same in Europe, a European WCBR?
The answer was, maybe, but there was one pro and one con. The Pro: European scientists are more often skiers. The con: the negative reaction by the influential academic mandarins, at least in France, when they listened to my project nad replied, “Do you mean a … SKI meeting?” Well, my reaction was, never mind! In some ways, this encouraged me to stubbornly plunge in to the adventure.
Yes, ‘the adventure’ started in 1980.
I had a great encouragement by our American colleagues like Bart Hoebel, Sarah Leibowitz and others, saying that they would rather attend the EWCBR than the WCBR (and they have ever since), and by many Scandinavians, Dutch and Germans, like Wolf Singer and Walter Zieglgänsberger.

The most daunting challenge facing us in the early days was the lack of both funding and infrastructure. So what?! My lab and the printing facilities of the College de France, my home institution, would contribute for free, and everybody, including my co-workers, would help on a voluntary basis. Note that this spirit has lasted until today, where the only (modest) pay goes to the Secretary. The housing expenses had to be low and if possible in one single hotel to induce better interaction, camaraderie and future inter-lab collaboration. Luckily, a friend of mine was the owner of a ski-club in Vars in the Southern French Alps and he was happy to make this hotel available at the lowest cost because we were ‘the Doctors’ (a title he had dreamt of himself, but being the son of a poor migrant Greek family he had to work as a child to feed his little brothers and was obliged to stop going to school).
At the first meeting we were 74 participants, with good spirits, good science, good camaraderie, including a masquerade party organized by my daughter Kalypso, ski competition and already a few collaborative projects. A little anecdote: One morinig, there is a sudden blackout in the middle of a session on …. Vision. Panic!
We rush desperately to my friend, the hotel owner, who, being furious, calls immediately the central electricity agency; they tell him they had to do it on our side of the village because there wasn’t enough power and because the other side was a priority zone. Guess what our protector

replied: “What? Do you know you are doing damage to the world’s greatest scientists that we have the honor to serve?” And, instantly the light returned to our Vision victims at the expense of the ‘priority zone’ of the village ….
Already by the next year the word hat gotten around and we had to refuse attendees. From then on our EWCBRs became yearly rendezvous, as inexpensive as possible, covering as large an area of neuroscience as possible and based – of course! – on the principle of ‘excellence’. While our commitment to the breadth of topics covered never faltered, I must admit that my particular field, the mechanism of basic behaviors, was more regularly dealt with. The organization slowly improved with the contributions of Corinne as the secretary, who became an expert, the indefatigable Henri Coulaud as the treasurer, Martine Orosco and Simon Thornton and, of course, Walter Zieglgänsberger, when he took over the responsibility of editing the volume of abstracts and introducing added vigor and financial savvy to the whole project.

In March 1999, during the 19th EWCBR in La Plagne, while skiing down the last downhill with three Dutch colleagues in order to attend our last session, I fell and suffered an injury of my cervical spinal cord, resulting in a complete Tetraplegia. I became a ‘neurosurgeon on the other side’ starting with my on-the-spot diagnosis and my directing the helicopter to the Grenoble neurosurgery department led by my friend Professor Benabid for an emergency operation. After two months of resuscitation and a year of rehabilitation efforts, I was able to come back to attend the 20th anniversary of our adventure and enjoy the unforgettable show organized by Sara Leibowitz. I continued to be directly involved up to 2006, thanks to my precious collaborators who protected me from undue onus, and to Jose, my wife, without whom I wouldn’t have recovered and been able to come back to pursue the EWCBR’s journey (dare I say piste), which started 26 years ago.
Now that it is, finally, time for me to retire, I am happy to see the continuation and improvement of the EWCBR tradition by Walter Zieglgänsberger as its President, Rene Pumain as the President of the non-profit Association “Promotion de Neurosciences Europeénnes” in charge of managing the meetings, and as always the talented treasurer Henri Coulaud and the ‘Angel of our temple’, Corinne.
Long life and success to our scientific family!