

Looking back to the future: the road to United European Gastroenterology Federation (UEGF) and the First United European Gastroenterology Week (UEGW), Athens 1992

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*Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past*

T.S. Eliot, Burnt Norton, Four Quartets

The Prelude

In the beginning it was the idea. Ideas are mighty seeds, which can bring abundant crops, but they may also perish in oblivion, as if they were never born. For noble ideas to bear fruit and become trees with roots and branches over time there are three fundamental forces interacting in synchrony and evolution.

First force and the *prima facie* factor is the vision. Second, is a critical mass of dedicated people who share the vision. The critical mass is not necessarily a quantitative dimension. Rather it is crucial *l'esprit de corps* and dedication to move forward. Third, is the time factor, when conditions are ripe to break new ground.

The idea of a European Forum of Gastroenterology and implementation of this ambitious undertaking rightfully belongs to the late Professor Aldo Torsoli (1924-2002). He was a patrician and a man of vision, as aptly described by his close Italian colleagues Massimo Crespi and Alberto Montori.

Indeed, he was the first who had the idea of creating a Federation of European Gastroenterology, an umbrella organization bringing together the major GI and related Societies and Associations in Europe and the organization of a European Gastroenterology Forum. The idea was hatched during the International Congress of Gastroenterology and European Congress of Digestive Endoscopy in Rome in 1988. Torsoli was the President of the 13th International Congress of Gastroenterology, organized by the Italian Society of Gastroenterology. The mandate to organize the Congress was given by the ASNEMGE (Association des Societes Nationales Europeennes et Mediterraneennes de Gastroenterologie), the oldest Gastroenterology Association in Europe founded

in 1947. The World Organization of Gastroenterology was founded later in 1954.

The forerunner of ASNEMGE and OMGE was the Societe Internationale de Gastroenterologie (SIGE), which was founded by another visionary man, the Belgian surgeon and radiologist Georges Brohee (1887-1957), who was the prime mover in organizing the first International Congress of Gastroenterology in Brussels in 1935. After the war, Brohee took again the initiative to activate SIGE, but a consensus at a global scale was not reached. Instead, a European and Mediterranean Forum in Gastroenterology took shape by the formation of ASNEMGE, a federation of European and Mediterranean National Societies / Associations of Gastroenterology. The first International Congress of Gastroenterology by ASNEMGE was organized in Lausanne in 1948 and thereafter it was held initially biennially and later quadrennially with the joint organization at a later stage with the European Society of Gastrointestinal Endoscopy (ESGE). During the 13th International Congress in Rome, in accordance with the ASNEMGE Statutes, as in previous Congresses, the General Assembly voted on the candidate National Societies and venues to organize the next International Congress of Gastroenterology in September 1992. September or October were the usual months that the Congress was organized. The Hellenic Society of Gastroenterology submitted a bid to the secretariat of ASNEMGE to organize the 14th International Congress in Athens in 1992. Secretary General was Ludo Standaert from Antwerp, an eminent personality in European Gastroenterology, who had served ASNEMGE with distinction and leadership for 20 years.

Bids from several National Societies were presented and the Hellenic Society was given the mandate to organize the 14th International Congress of Gastroenterology and the Congress of Digestive Endoscopy in Athens in 1992. However, the new idea of a European Forum was hovering in the wings. The International Congress in Rome in 1988 was destined to be the last of the *regime ancien*. A historical cycle was completed and a new era in European Gastroenterology was on the rise.

Aldo Torsoli, the man with the vision was there. The critical mass of people was also there, leading European

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gastroenterologists, surgeons and other specialists involved in key positions in European Societies / Associations. They espoused the new idea with earnest support and dedication to the cause. Finally, the time was ripe for a new concept and implementation of a European Forum in Gastroenterology and related disciplines. The scene was too fragmented and European Gastroenterology as a whole was underrepresented in Congresses by individual societies. The aim was to foster integration of specialty societies of scientific merit in an umbrella organization with equal participation, regardless of size to organize one major annual multidisciplinary European Gastroenterology Congress. Noble cause, indeed, which requires to put aside antagonisms, self interests, egos, petty aggrandizement, scientific ambitions and the lack of tradition in Europe in scientific cooperation, as it is the cohesive force in the United States. The stakes were high, but the idea that its time had come was powerful to break new ground.

The Composition

Under the enlightened and inspiring leadership of Aldo Torsoli, a rather small group of gastroenterologists and surgeons formed the initial nucleus and without delay, set to work as early as in October 1988, right after the Congress in Rome. These people, who contributed in the early stage to UEGF formation were affiliated with ASNEMGE (Torsoli, Dowling, Bennett, Arvanitakis), ESGE (Crespi, Montori), CICD (Collegium Internationale Chirurgiae Digestivae) (Speranza, Alexander-Williams), EPC (European Pancreatic Club) (Gyr, Singer), ESPGAN (European Society of Pediatric Gastroenterology and Nutrition) (Strandvik, Walker-Smith), EASL (European Association for the Study of Liver) (Jansen, Feher) and EAGE (European Association of Gastroenterology and Endoscopy) (Tytgat, Krejs, Malagelada).

Over a 4-year period (1988-1992) several long and arduous and occasionally fervent meetings were required to reach an accord. These meetings took place in Rome (the first one in Torsoli's office) and thereafter, in L'Aquila (Italy), Sydney during the World Congress (OMGE) in 1990, Pesaro, Isola de Ponza.

The term United European Gastroenterology Federation (UEGF) was coined. It was emblematical of European cooperation of seven major Societies of Gastroenterology and related disciplines and other specialties, the so called "seven sisters" and United European, in principle of common legacy of culture and civilization in Europe. In that regard it is also of historic interest that the development and formation of UEGF ran parallel to the evolution of the European Union culminating in 1992 in the Maastricht treaty.

The ground was prepared in these 4 years, putting together the pieces of the UEGF puzzle, in order to ensure that it will materialize and not fall through. This was attributed to a large extent to the superb diplomatic talent of Torsoli and his supreme intellectual power to present the issues with clarity, honesty and persuasion. Those of us involved in all stages as

the group was getting larger and more pluralistic in views and attitudes provided support and contributed collectively to the cause. It is a footnote to history and footnotes usually tell the story, that Torsoli was not only a visionary man, but also a man of action, who commanded respect and acted on conviction, a truly intellectual activist.

An Interim Coordinating Council of UEGF took office in 1990 to prepare the ground for UEGF activities and administer the proceedings. The first Chairman was Vincenzo Speranza (1990), followed by Gunter Krejs (1991) and Aldo Torsoli (1992) Honorary Secretary was named Hermon Dowling and Alberto Montori Honorary Treasurer. The Coordinating Council was composed of two representatives of each of the seven participating Societies / Associations, namely 1) ASNEMGE, 2) CICD, 3) EAGE, 4) EASL, 5) EPC, 6) ESGE, 7) ESPGAN.

The principles of UEGF were agreed upon in order to establish solid ground foundations. The principles were clear and fundamental to ensure not only the formation of UEGF but also its longevity. These were: 1) equal participation; 2) equal representation on the General Assembly (two representatives from each Society / Association); 3) option of individual Societies / Associations to maintain their annual meeting; and 4) distribution of the proceeds of Congresses by the rule of 3. This meant one third for UEGF to operate as the core organization, one third divided by 7 to the partner Societies / Associations and one third to the organizing National Society. The General Assembly, according to the statutes, was the governing body of UEGF. Decisions were taken by a majority vote. The President was elected for a one-year term, the Secretary General and a Treasurer for 4 years. Usually for the office of the President partner Societies / Associations were alternating.

The formation of UEGF ran parallel to the annual United European Gastroenterology Week (UEGW), a milestone in European Gastroenterology, emulating the Digestive Disease Week (DDW) in the United States.

The mandate in 1988 by the ASNEMGE to the Hellenic Society of Gastroenterology to organize the 14th International Congress of Gastroenterology in Athens in 1992 was proposed to be the first UEGW. The Hellenic Society of Gastroenterology accepted the responsibility. Thus, the first UEGW in Athens, 25-30 September 1992 inaugurated the new era in European Gastroenterology.

First Performance – First UEGW, Athens, 25-30 September 1992

Firsts in the life of nations, people, families, organizations, groups, in human endeavor in general, carry a heavy burden of responsibility. First time success or first time failure may set the precedent on subsequent actions.

The Hellenic Society of Gastroenterology undertook this responsibility with the valuable support of UEGF and the partner Societies / Associations, as well as, by leading scientists to organize the first major European Congress. Successful it

was by universal acclaim. It was also fitting that the official birth of UEGF took place during the opening ceremony, on the Pnyx Hill, across the Acropolis and Parthenon, the site of Assembly of the ancient city of Athens, where democracy was born; a pillar of western civilization.

The logo of the first UEGW was a depiction of Europe, with whom Zeus had fallen in love. According to the myth, Zeus disguised as a bull, abducted and carried her to Crete. The frontispiece of publications of the UEGW was a Cycladic marble idol of a harpist from the island of Keros (Circa 2800 BC), an outstanding piece of Cycladic art with intelligent conception of volume and rhythmical movement of skill and sensitivity. This idol is on display in the National Archeological Museum in Athens. The venue of the UEGW was the Stadium of Peace and Friendship overlooking the Saronic Bay, which was adapted in terms of architectural interventions to function as the Congress Center.

The scientific program included state-of-the art lectures, Clinical Symposia, Working Team Reports, Gastroenterology Across Frontiers Reports, Controversies, Symposia on Scientific basis of Gastroenterology, Research Lectures, Basic Research Lectures, Endoscopic Seminar and Postgraduate Courses. In total there were 397 speakers and Chairpersons. 1,355 abstracts were accepted. 30 papers were presented in Plenary Sessions, 129 oral presentations and 1,190 posters. The abstracts were published in *Hellenic Journal of Gastroenterology*, the official organ of Hellenic Society of Gastroenterology.

There were 7,212 registered participants. The majority were from Europe (70%) and the remainder from USA, Canada, Australia, Asia (mainly Japan), South America and Africa.

The success of the first UEGW in Athens in 1992 is credited to the support and trust of the UEGF Council and the guidance of the President Torsoli, the generous support of the Hellenic Society of Gastroenterology, the dedication and altruism of the Executive Committee, which had the operational and administrative responsibility, the Hellenic Scientific Committee, the Local Organizing Committee and the International Advisory Committee. Without the support of all the people involved the successful organization of the Congress of this size at that time would not have been possible.

In the opening address, as President of the first UEGW speaking on behalf of all the people who contributed to the birth of UEGF and UEGW, I stated: "We must not forget that there is no pain like the pain of a new idea, but we should also remember that nothing is more powerful than an idea that its time has come. UEGF and UEGW are indeed an idea that its time has come".

Twenty years later (1992-2012)

Subsequent venues to Athens were Barcelona, Oslo, Berlin, Paris, Birmingham, Rome, Brussels, Amsterdam, Geneva, Madrid, Prague, Copenhagen, Berlin, Paris, Vienna, London, Barcelona, Stockholm and Amsterdam.

The spiral and unprecedented success of UEGF and UEGW in the years following the first UEGW in Athens in 1992 is phenomenal. United European Gastroenterology (UEG), as is its current name, is truly one of the leading European medical organizations, with a European and global impact. The success of subsequent UEGWs is due to the high standards set for the scientific program and the selection of abstracts. It has become clearly the equivalent in Europe of the American DDW, as a major Forum of Gastroenterology and related disciplines. The attendance number doubled compared with the early UEGWs. Attendance reached 14,000 participants in the recent UEGWs and the number of abstracts submitted to 4,000. The structure of the UEG was enlarged from a 14-member Assembly and Council representing 2 members from each Founding Societies to a General Assembly of 62 members composed of 3 representatives from each Founding Society, 2 representatives from associate societies and 23 representatives of national societies. The General Assembly elects the President elect, the Secretary General, the Treasurer elect and the Chairs of Scientific, Public Affairs and Education Committees. The Council consists of 13 members and the Executive Committee of the President, President elect, Secretary and Treasurer.

The mission and scope of United European Gastroenterology was also enlarged, to encompass actions and initiatives which expanded its role and impact at scientific educational and public level at a European level. It has organized the Program of Rising Stars of Gastroenterology to stimulate young investigators, the leaders of tomorrow, the National Scholar Award, Training Courses, Research support, EU-affairs (colorectal cancer screening), Awards and Grants, the inauguration of its headquarters, the House of United European Gastroenterology in Vienna and recently the launching of United European Gastroenterology Journal.

Also Torsoli and the founding fathers of UEGF and UEGW must be rightly content with the evolution, growth and a stellar development of United European Gastroenterology, an achievement made possible by the dedication, enthusiasm and innovation of their successors.

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