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Chapter 20

**THE FOUNDING OF
THE INTERNATIONAL ASTRONAUTICAL FEDERATION:
A MEMOIR***

Alexandre Ananoff†

After having analyzed, in the light of official documents, the work of Robert Esnault-Pelterie, the Rep-Hirsch Prize‡, the foundation of the first French Astronautical Society, the publications of *Astronef*, the National Congress of French Aviation and in particular the most important one of the First Astronautical Congress. I reviewed in *Memoirs of an astronaut* by Blanchard in Paris (1978) the various difficulties I had to face in founding the Federation.

May these lines show you that nothing is obtained without perseverance and endeavors.... and that the founding caused me a lot of trouble and headaches.

During the First International Astronautical Congress which was held on October 2, 1950, the decision to found an International Astronautical Federation was unanimously taken. In September 1951 the final decisions concerning its functioning were taken in London.

Apart from this decision which we thought most vital, the participants worked out the program for the London Congress, the subject of which was dedicated to Cosmic Stations. Each member attending the 1950 Congress promised to do his best in his country to promote research and publications.

Hardly had the First Congress finished than we started an intense propaganda campaign throughout France to inform the general public what we expected from Cosmic Stations. On January 27, 1951, we found it useful to initiate a briefing session at headquarters of the Aeronautique - Club de France. The memorandum which I circulated for the convocation ended as follows:

"...such research work is to illustrate the efforts of French technicians."

* Presented at the 13th History Symposium of the International Academy of Astronautics, Munich, FRG, September 1979. Editor's note: Translated into English from original in French. Since it is not clear what language quotations were written in, the editors have made some minor corrections in the English version.

† One of the Founders of the International Astronautical Federation, Paris, France.

‡ Editor's note: Robert Esnault-Pelterie - Hirsch Prize.

Unfortunately, the effect I had hoped for was not achieved. My lectures as well as my briefing sessions did not spark any research work, and I wondered whether they awakened any predisposition at all. On the brink of despair, I wrote a long letter to the President of the British Interplanetary Society on March 30, 1951, from which I would like to quote the following passage:

"...I have done my best here in France to ensure that our Congress will have the success it deserves. Unfortunately, it isn't very easy in our country to initiate research work in Cosmic Stations because the subject is generally thought to be exhausted. On April 20th, I intend to deliver a talk at the Sorbonne on the research findings related to Cosmic Stations. No matter what happens, *you may be certain that I will do my best* to help you with your difficult task ... Concerning the statutes of the future International Federation, I think that the Society of Stuttgart has provided you with a proposal so that I find it useless to elaborate one myself. To my mind you could best send me a copy and I would make the notes I deem useful from a French point of view in the margin..."

On May 25, 1951, London, having acknowledged my efforts, informed me about the suggestions made in different countries about certain important aspects of the statutes, i.e., *the aim, the functioning of the Federation, its funds, its management, the vote*, etc... I was very surprised and a little annoyed to see the wide variety of suggestions. I then felt pity for the organizers of the Second Congress who would have to screen the suggestions to be able to submit a homogeneous and satisfactory proposal to the assembly in September.

Just to give you an idea of the wide range of suggestions, I have chosen, by way of example, the issue of the *vote*.

The **Society of Stuttgart** suggested the following: "Each member Society will have one vote, plus an additional vote in case it outnumbers by 1/4 the total of member societies, plus a further vote if it outnumbers by 1/3 the total number of member societies".

The **Society of Hamburg** suggested the following: "Each member Society should have ten votes plus an additional vote for every hundredth or part of hundredth of its total number of members".

The **Society of Innsbruck** felt that each member society should have one vote. The United States could be given some more votes as "they represent a continent and not just a country".

The **Society of Copenhagen** thought that it would be good if "each member society had one vote, plus an additional vote for every five members of a total of 1 million inhabitants of its country".

The **Society of Madrid** simply suggested that "...each member society should have one vote".

Mr. G. Partal suggested on Italy's behalf that "... each member society should have one vote, plus an additional vote for every hundredth or part of hundredth of its own participating members. The vote should be secret, it should be simple majority vote and it should be valid regardless of the number of delegates attending the assembly. Moreover, every member society could have an additional vote depending on its importance"...etc...

In the face of all these differing opinions, all doubtlessly respectable, I refused to voice an opinion of my own in order to avoid further complication for the organizers of the Second Congress.

On July 19, 1951, that was less than two months before the date fixed for the assembly, I wrote in despair to some personalities* and official organizations. Many did not even answer, although the letter contained nothing to be thrown into the wastepaper basket. I fear however that this had happened. The silence on the part of the Deputy Secretary of Air Affairs was particularly astonishing as he knew me personally. He was well informed about my past activities and my participation in the National Aviation Congress in which I had played an important role.

My letter read as follows:

"...It seems to me, Sir, that it is of the upmost importance for France to be officially represented at that Congress. This is not only a matter of prestige but because it is always beneficial to establish direct contacts between foreign technicians working on the same problem... I should like to express the hope, Sir, that you will decide on delegating some of your staff in order to represent France with dignity at the international meeting..."

Finally, on September 3, 1951, the Second International Astronautical Congress was inaugurated. Although I arrived in London with empty hands, representing a vacillating French Society, I was welcomed with all the honors by the English delegation and taken to the headquarters of the society. After a friendly meal in an intimate atmosphere, Mr. Cleaver, the President, inaugurated the session. Having to take the plane back to France, I couldn't stay until the end.

I remember perfectly well, however, that I immediately requested to speak, suggesting that the headquarters of the Federation should be established in Switzerland. After a short discussion, in the course of which it had been suggested that the headquarters be established in the U.S.A., certain participants replied that the archives wouldn't be safe there as "that country could be exposed to bombardments." My proposition was nonetheless accepted.

I noticed at that Second Congress that both the U.S.A.[†] and the Soviets were absent. This meant that Mr. Cleaver hadn't succeeded in persuading the Americans, despite a common language and the promise they had made in Paris. As to the Soviets, I was prepared to do the job. The task was not easy, but I knew that both the Soviet Union and the U.S.A. watched each other suspiciously. I was convinced that the Russians would follow suit if the Americans joined the Congress.

On September 9, 1951, that is hardly two days after the end of the Congress, I got a card from Mr. Sängner which, despite its brevity, was unambiguous:

"... Dear friend, I am glad to inform you that the Federation was founded and that its permanent headquarters will be in Switzerland as you had requested..."[‡]

* On August 2nd, to General Lafargue: "...Not being convinced of the success of my endeavors, I chose not to propose to my board of directors to delegate a member of my staff".

† Editor's note: The U.S. was represented by the American Rocket Society (ARS) and the Pacific Rocket Society (PRS).

‡ "The First Congress of the Federation took place in Stuttgart in 1952" (see *Revue Française d'Astronautique*, Sept.-Oct. 1963, p.197). Editor's note: This Congress being the first after the foundation of the IAF is in the official numbering of Congresses, the third one after Paris (1950) and London (1951).

The Federation had been founded, true enough, but its statutes were still very hazy. For the Federation to work officially, it needed the statutes of all the foreign societies. Stemmer, the delegate of Switzerland, whom I didn't know, was consequently charged to found a Swiss Society which was still missing.

I must acknowledge that Stemmer fulfilled his task very well. This kind of job takes a painstaking bureaucrat who does not necessarily share the astronomical ideal in the bargain. To him, establishing an Astronautical Society was very much the same as establishing a philatelic society, or a society dedicated to trout fishing.

The word "Astronautics" didn't mean anything to him, as I soon realized. On November 14, 1951 he founded an *Astronautical Club*, appointed himself technical director, and chose E. Klöti as his secretary. From that moment onwards, undoubtedly in a hurry to declare the Federation, he left out of consideration the efforts of the various national societies, discarding their difficulties, and resorted to Swiss legislation, and revealed himself a petty bureaucrat guilty of partiality. To my deep regret, my intentions, however honest and constructive, found no echo with Stemmer. He remained indifferent to our problems; our permanent struggle didn't interest him at all. He only saw the statutes and the number of members. He required precise information, evidence, official papers. Everything had to be done speedily.

My efforts to persuade the Soviets to take part in the Astronautical Congresses ran parallel to these fruitless discussions with Switzerland. The extremely important intercession I had that year with Frederic Joliot-Curie was undoubtedly very useful with regard to the future.

As for my negotiations with Stemmer, they were more and more incomprehensible. His letters of May 8 and 20, 1952 did not put him in a very sympathetic light. Did he know about the result of my conversation? I do now know! The major difference between Stemmer and myself was that he saw politics everywhere. That is very hateful when one was only interested in astronautics and the creation of an International Federation. Stemmer, probably in a hurry to declare the Federation, did it without any French participation. Accustomed to many irregularities, I was not surprised when he very simply decided to suppress my group--even though, as he was aware, it was I who had designated him, and of course Switzerland, at the Second Congress in London. He thought in this way he could prevent me from approaching the Soviets. In June 1952 I delivered the Tsiolkovsky Medal to the representatives of the U.S.S.R. At the end of my initial effort, I did not want to participate in the Third Congress in Stuttgart, which took place from September 1 to 3, 1952.

The reasons were easy to understand. As a matter of fact, participation of the I.A.F. within the UNESCO had not only to be examined, but also the foreseen president would have to be a German. There were for me two sufficient reasons not to go to Stuttgart: First, I could express my opinion regarding the experience in

* On May 26, 1952, E. Sängler wrote to me: "M. Stemmer has sent to me a copy of the letter he sent to you; of course it is not very nice...; I will never be a hindrance for the acceptance of your proposition about the President of the Federation, a proposal I have already very seriously defended in your name in London".

1950; the second reason was more delicate, because I had to make a choice between E. Sanger and H. Oberth. Even I was convinced that an international association had to have every year a President from a member country. It was difficult for me to publicly oppose the nomination of one of them because of my friendship with both.

After the Congress at Stuttgart, I read the *Weltraum* and was sorry that the motion I had initiated for the integration of the Soviet Union within the Federation had not found any echo. I did remark: "...This would have still helped me for my negotiations..." (letter to Kolle, 21.12.1952). To my expressed regret, I did not get any answer. Then I wrote a long letter to the President of the Astronautical Society in London in which after I evoked the Tsiolkovsky Medal award, I implied that "this was the first step toward the integration of Russia in our yearly meetings." I thought that the Federation would grasp the opportunity and that it would support me. Unfortunately, Switzerland gave me to understand "that, when in principle, one agreed with my effort, it would in any case not be possible to support it". and "that all negotiations I should undertake in that direction had to be done as an individual." I believed one more time that the Federation had forgotten its real goal, which was to defend the interest of astronautics and support the national societies when this effort is of general interest. I ended my letter wishing to get quick news: I was interested to "know his opinion on the statutes in general and on the actions of some countries in particular" (letter to Loeser, 21.12.1952). As before, I did not get any answer.

Finally, a third letter was sent to Frederick C. Durant III, where, after enumeration of the previous subjects, I added:

"...I do not hide from you the fact that my enthusiasm concerning the creation of an International Federation will diminish in proportion as inequalities and injustices occur...."

On March 10, 1953, Durant, president of the "American Rocket Society", answered me. In substance, he desired an International Federation which would help the national societies and did not make any opposition to the participation of the Soviets. He even considered such participation desirable. On April 20, I wrote to Stemmer, Clarke and Durant III a personal letter, which essentially dwelled on the same subject but comprised nuances that I wanted to underline:

o For Stemmer who made the invitation, I wrote:

"...in agreement with E. Sanger and the Soviet Embassy, I send you the following proposition: please send an invitation to the Soviet Embassy in Bern, but give us at least one week before sending, so that the Soviet Embassy in Paris can activate the Soviet Embassy in Bern in order to allow them to accept the invitation. The Soviet Embassy at the Congress could be represented under two different forms: either the representation by a member of the Soviet Embassy (Cultural Attache for instance) who would only act as observer, or a delegation of 2 or 3 scientists, directly delegated by the Academy of Sciences in Moscow. This last option would be more difficult to realize and Mr. Sanger considers with me that it would be already interesting to see a participation in the first form..."

o To Clarke I wrote:

"...it would be sufficient now that Mr. Stemmer sent an invitation to Bern and the pressure of the Soviet Embassy in Paris would decide the Cultural Attaché who resides in Switzerland to participate in our Congress. I would be satisfied when the effort I have put forth during the last 3 years in the interest of the Federation could find a favorable echo by your Society..."

o Finally, to Durant, I wrote on the same date the following text:

"...I believe to succeed, to influence the Soviets to be represented at the Congress in Zürich... I believe that we do not have to be too exacting for the first year; it would only be a first contact, and next year it will be an official delegation of the Academy of Sciences of Moscow which will be able to participate in our deliberations..."

For each of the three letters I asked for an answer accepting my initiative. On the next May 4, 1953, as Mr. Clarke was away (in the United States), L. R. Shepard transmitted to me the opinion of the council which examined my suggestion:

"...The point of view of BIS concerning the question of the participation of the U.S.S.R. in the IAF coincides absolutely with the opinion which has been expressed by many representatives at the Congress of Stuttgart and which is documented on pages 17 and 18 of the Congress minutes. As an international organization, the IAF has to receive every Astronautics society in the world as long as their objectives correspond with those of the Federation. However, every Society has to candidate by the IAF secretary and later on every transaction has to take place directly between the Secretary and the concerned Society. Undoubtedly, it is the privilege of Mr. Stemmer and the officials of the Swiss Society, which organize the Congress, to invite a Soviet Attaché to participate in the open sessions of this Congress if this is wished by everybody. They have to decide, and the rest of the delegates will accept their decisions. It is nevertheless difficult to imagine how the representative of a government could participate in the business sessions of the IAF, as this right is exclusively reserved to the Astronautical Societies.

The opinion of the BIS is that it would be inaccurate that the representative of whatever government would participate in the sessions in person, even though as an observer. We think that when approaching the Soviet authorities, in Paris or elsewhere, it must be quite clear that the interests of the IAF only concern the Astronautical Societies and not the governmental organisms. If this is the case, then we fully approve..."

As to my friend Durant, president of the American Rocket Society, in his letter of June, 10, 1953, he wrote as spokesman of the council:

"...As promised, I examined with the ARS directors if it is possible that the U.S.S.R. and the countries of Eastern Europe can be members of the IAF. In essence, the directors agree with what I wrote in my last letters. They recognize that the U.S.S.R. is too big a country that its absence in the IAF would not be felt. The composition of the Federation is unbalanced by the absence of a country to which credit many historical exploits belonging in rocket propulsion and other scientific valors. But I hope this new association will not have any political incidence! The aspiration to explore space is universal and does not have national borders. The ARS will therefore not oppose this year the presence of a Soviet non-scientist, only in the prospective that in following years, it will have to do with professionals, scientist delegates and real members of the Federation..."

Thus England, with some oratorical precautions, accepted in substance my idea, and America was delighted to decide in favor of my project. Encouraged by these opinions, I increased my approach to the U.S.S.R. Embassy in Paris and asked for support in the current year only through the presence of one representative of the Soviet Union.

I was so sure about the success of my negotiations that I did not pay attention to Switzerland which, I thought, would have to execute our orders since they represented the Federation. Alas! it transpired very differently. On June 26th, Durant wrote me again to let me know:

"... that Mr. Stemmer has transmitted an invitation to the U.S.S.R. Embassy in Bern. He has enclosed formularities which could be communicated to every Soviet scientist organization that would be interested to send a delegation."

"Although this step does not correspond to the plan you initially proposed, I hope it will help to reach our common goal, i.e., the inclusion of the U.S.S.R. and Eastern European countries as members of our Federation..."

Thus Mr. Stemmer did not follow my instructions approved by influential members of the Federation. He considered that I had nothing to say because I did not represent any declared Society within the Federation. I was probably for him a simple individual, nothing more! The Soviets, of course, were absent at the Fourth Congress in Zürich (1953). My negotiations were considered without any foundation and my word as nonexistent. Mr. Stemmer, through his unskillful initiative, delayed for some years the participation of the Soviets.

For some countries, as for instance the U.S.S.R., the reason why this great nation did not want to participate in this Congress was uniquely that *political* quarters did not take us seriously. I had therefore my reasons to believe that the politicians, once agreeing, would give their scientists the green light according to our articles and would participate each year. But to get this result, it was necessary to have a particular versatility and flexibility of opinion which seemed to be totally lacking in Mr. Stemmer.

Fortunately, the Americans were present in Stuttgart: I was now sure that the Soviets, seeing the participation of the American Rocket Society, would not fail to do what was necessary so that a Soviet delegation would participate in the next congress.

At the Third Congress, Durant was nominated as President of the Federation. I was particularly satisfied with this decision because he was not only one of the most representative personalities of a great American society, but because the respect I bore him was sincere. Nevertheless, raging about the clumsy interference of Mr. Stemmer, I did not participate in the Fourth Congress in Zürich and did not write anymore to anybody.

Mr. Durant, on October 2nd, gave to understand that my absence

"...caused (him), as well other delegates, disappointment. Although we will have some French visitors, a delegate from your Society will be missing one more time. Refer to my last letter and you will see that I am strongly convinced of the need of your assistance and your cooperation during the next year. I do not understand why you have not shown any sign of life during the last months".

"You will easily conceive how much I have at heart to develop the International Astronautical Federation next year. As I wrote you, it would be a great pleasure for me to receive your comments and suggestions concerning its future evolution. Your advice will be really welcome. After all, it is mainly thanks to your enthusiasm and your work that the first steps toward the creation of the IAF have been taken..."

It was precisely because I have participated actively in the creation of the Federation that I did not want to get overrun by Stemmer--a secretary even when he was the Federation's secretary. I knew exactly what had to be done for astronautics and I did not wish at all to be managed by a person whom nobody had heard of before I put him in the light.

For the moment, I continued in spite of myself the creation of a national society. My task was scarcely easy and the participation of the Soviets would have helped strongly. But about this, no member of the Federation paid attention.

Nevertheless, in 1954, I attended the Congress in Innsbrück despite many different difficulties. The new French Society of Astronautics was not yet set up. I was suspected of being an accomplice with foreign countries. In a word, I realized every day that a really international attitude compatible with national interest was utopian and that a miracle was necessary to reach that goal. Nevertheless, I believed steadily more in this miracle than in the wisdom and the common sense of my fellow-citizens. *Science has no border ...*: that is what one says. It is what I daily tried to do with all the difficulties it makes.

In Innsbrück, I was very surprised when an ovation was given to me. The Americans were particularly satisfied to have me there. Then, although I still was not member of the Federation--because of lack of a Society--I was nevertheless its founder. A special position was created for me and *many of the present members swore never to forget what I was doing for them!*

It was only at the Sixth Congress in Copenhagen (August 1, 1955) that the Soviets headed by Leonid Sedov participated actively for the first time in the international deliberations. Don't forget that the premise of the Soviet participation was felt since the American presence at Zürich.

In fact, after 1954, the Academy of Sciences in Moscow created an Astronautics commission and nominated as its head Sedov and Tichonravov. During the same year, the Academy founded a Tsiolkovsky Prize and the Tsiolkovsky Medal and for the year after (1955) delegated Sedov to the Sixth Congress.

As I was aware of the much awaited participation, I spent 48 hours in the capital of Denmark in the company of Sedov, whom I admired very much because he "despised what was mediocre and secondary".

Finally, I could appreciate this event of capital importance for the outcome of which I had worked without respite, against wind and tide.