

THE EARLY YEARS

“We had some good times”

Roger Maréchal

Assistant Secretary-General of ISO, 1964-1979 (joined ISO in 1949)



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Background

Roger Maréchal began working for ISO in 1949, and retired as Assistant Secretary-General in 1979. He joined the Central Secretariat when it was two years old, and his interview focuses on what one might call the “early years” of the organization, the period before the rapid expansion of ISO which started in the late 1960s.

Properly speaking, ISO came into existence in 1947, the year after the London conference. Delegates had agreed that the constitution must be formally ratified by 15 countries within six months, and Denmark sent the necessary 15th approval on 23rd February. Several crucial steps forward were taken the same year. In April 1947, a meeting in Paris produced a recommended list of ISO Technical Committees. (There were 67 of these initially, about two-thirds of which were based on previous ISA committees.) In June, a Secretary-General was appointed. “Mr. Henry St. Leger,” reported the President of the Selection Committee, “is an American with close French connections, a wide experience in diplomatic questions, and a perfect knowledge of both English and French.” By the end of 1947, ISO had been granted Consultative Status (Category B) by the United Nations. Considerable work began to establish links with the many international organizations which had an interest in ISO’s fields of standardization. Roger Maréchal describes his own part in this process.

By the early 1950s, the Technical Committees were starting to produce what were known at that time as “Recommendations”. The basic idea of postwar international standardization, as Olle Sturen put it in his first speech to the ISO Council as Secretary-General in 1969, was to “evolve international standards from those already evolved nationally, and then to re-implement them nationally”. ISO’s Recommendations were therefore only intended to influence existing national standards; they were not referred to by businesses as independent

international standards. They nonetheless took a long time to produce. Only two Recommendations had been published by ISO's fifth birthday. Even by ISO's tenth birthday, in 1957, the figure had only risen to 57. According to ISO's first Annual Review in 1972, "it was in the sixties that international standardization really began to break through". Whereas about 100 Recommendations were published in the fifties, about 1400 documents were approved in the sixties.

One consequence of this productivity was a dramatic increase in the workload of the Central Secretariat. By the mid-fifties this was starting to cause concern. Roger Maréchal describes how on some Saturday mornings the entire staff pulled together to despatch documents to member bodies. It became increasingly evident that there were not enough staff available – particularly skilled staff. In 1957, the Council agreed a 50% increase in the subscription of member bodies. The same year, Gordon Weston of the British Standards Institution (BSI) was asked to review the Central Secretariat's working methods. A decade later, the subscription had to be increased again by 30%, and Roy Binney of BSI was reviewing the Central Secretariat, recommending (among other things) the appointment



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of more engineers. Later in this book, Olle Sturen describes how this review contributed to the eventual resignation of Henry St. Leger.

Roger Maréchal's interview touches on one further theme – ISO's relationship with the long-established International Electrotechnical Commission. The minutes of the ISO Council meeting in June 1947 record that the IEC had resolved to "affiliate with the ISO...and is prepared to cooperate immediately as the Electrical Division of ISO". This was on condition that "the name and technical procedure of IEC will be maintained". The IEC's Secretary, Charles Le Maistre, was asked to offer all possible help to his counterpart, and the two organizations embarked on a fifty-year collaboration which, if not always trouble-free, was invariably guided by the understanding that they needed to present a united front. The IEC and ISO have shared a building throughout their postwar existence. At the time that Roger Maréchal began working at ISO, the building in question was a pretty villa at Route de Malagnou, Geneva....

“We had some good times ”

That is Malagnou – ah, yes! Oui, oui, bien sûr! When I joined ISO, the offices were in a small private house. That verandah was just outside the office of the Secretary-General! ISO was on the ground floor and had two offices on the first floor. Those two windows there, on the ground floor – the first was my office, and the other was Mr. Salt's. (Ah, Salt was funny! On some mornings he came in, said hello to everybody, went in his office, locked the door, and left through the window!) The other offices on the first floor were occupied by the IEC. That one was the office of Mr. Ruppert, the Executive Secretary of the IEC. And this was the office of his secretary, my wife. She was secretary at the London Conference. Did you know that? And on the second floor, when it was a nice day, the fellow working there dried photocopies on the tiles on the roof. Provided there was no wind. If there was a wind....!

ISO was a small organization. Nearly a developing organization, if I may say so. There were five of us. (In fact, there were five and a half; one employee was working in the morning at ISO, and in the afternoon at the IEC.) The Secretary-General was Henry St. Leger. Before Henry St. Leger joined ISO, he belonged to the American delegation to the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg. Now, I belonged to the French delegation and I needed his help because my office was in Paris. For liaison between Paris and Nuremberg, I was obliged to contact St. Leger, and we became friends. When the Tribunal came to an end, for two years I was

involved in the international trade of chemical products. But I stayed on good terms with St. Leger and when my father died, and I felt lost in Paris and felt the city was a desert, St. Leger understood and said: "If you want, come and join me at ISO."

As I said, I was the fifth employee. It was very funny because I discovered that – well, nothing was done! There was a beginning of an administration, but nothing much. There were three files, something like that! My priority was to organize the Secretariat; I left the technical part to the engineers. At that time, it was recognized that it was necessary to get on closer terms with people at the UN, the Economic Commission for Europe, WHO, ITU, and so forth – organizations which were active in the fields of our Technical Committees. There were some liaisons already, but they were arranged personally between friends. It was impossible to get an overall view. One of our first priorities was to let these organizations know what we were doing. At the beginning, I might attend a meeting of FAO, and a delegate from FAO would say: "We are very pleased to note the activity of ISO in our field of interest, but what are the results?" I was obliged to say: "In spite of all the work done, none of our Technical Committees has yet reached the stage of Recommendations." But after a certain number of years, 50 questions were solved and 200 others were born! Later, when ISO was mentioned in an international body of the UN people asked: "What does ISO think about that question? What can ISO do to help us?" Nobody asked: "What is meant by ISO?" It was finished, that period.

We had practically no money, and the subscription was made in dollars. As far as I remember, the minimum that the Council decided to ask from its members was USD 500, and the big five countries at that time were supposed to pay USD 6000. (One among them never paid.) The total, as far as I remember, was less than CHF 500000. It was very small. And it went on like that for a long time because the first Secretary-General asked for money periodically, but never asked for very much money. He managed to get by, but not to develop the organization.

We only recruited junior staff: typists, manual workers, people to help with the documentation, because we were publishing more. At the beginning, we still used stencils for reproduction. We were sending maybe 10 copies of a document, but it was quite a business, you know! I remember, even when we were free on Saturday mornings, we were requested to work to finish the despatches to member bodies. (At that time, there were 34 member bodies, something like that.) We were all involved, even the engineers: one girl was typing the address on the envelope, another was dictating the address, another had a list of the number of documents requested by each member. After that, an engineer



As ISO grew, the Central Secretariat moved in 1956 from its first office to the International Centre in rue de Varembe.

checked the documents. Everybody was kept busy! We left the office when everything was arranged: the papers were in the Post Office, the papers were archived, and so on. It was something! But in fact, at that time, we had the feeling that we were participating in an important activity. In fact, I think each one was supposed to bring his own stone with him, you know, to help to build the house. Personally, that's how I felt.

Anyway, the thing developed, and developed, and developed. Several years later, we installed our office in a new building – Rue de Varembeé. At that time we occupied the fifth floor together with the IEC. I'm obliged to mention the IEC periodically, because there was always a link. At the beginning, Henry St. Leger was helped by the Secretary-General of the IEC, Mr. Le Maistre. (Le Maistre was an English engineer. He was "Mr. Standardization", in fact – I think he belonged to IEC from the beginning, from 1906!). But Mr. St. Leger didn't appreciate this help. They weren't on good terms. Mr. Le Maistre, who was not always in Geneva, asked his assistant, his Executive Secretary Mr. Ruppert, to be of help to St. Leger. But again sparks flew! Whenever we mentioned the IEC within the ISO Central Secretariat, it was as if a storm had blown up suddenly. We were supposed to work all together, but the relationship was everything but friendly. Still, we had to discuss common questions; there were some technical committees from ISO in liaison with IEC technical committees. I often called on Mr. Ruppert at home after working hours to tell him what was going on. We were close friends.

It was almost as if the organization expanded without us noticing it. It was later on, when we made a report, that we realized that there had been an increase. I remember, for a long time, we were talking about documents, the amount of documents. And at one point, I realized that meant nothing, because there were documents which consisted of one sheet of paper and documents which consisted of fifty sheets of paper! So from that time on, I reported on the number of sheets of paper. And that changed everything! One year we might have 2 650 pages, for instance, and the following year with the same staff, we had 4 000, and the following year we had 9 000... Then you realized that something had to be done.

The ISO Council realized that it was necessary to develop the Central Secretariat more than it was developing. First, I think, we increased the staff, but it was still only manual staff, typists and single juniors. At the same time, it was arranged that those Secretariats which were held by English-speaking countries or French-speaking countries could send the number of documents necessary to be circulated. That meant that instead of sending one copy in English, they sent 200 – if possible – and the French translation would be made and circulated later. So, yes – that cut the time of reproduction, and of course we increased the

speed of circulation. Then it was decided to increase the subscription by 50%. But the beginning of the development of the organization is really after 1965. What made the development of the organization impossible was the personality of the Secretary-General.

Henry St. Leger gave up at the end of 1965, and for eight months there was no Secretary-General. There were two Assistant Secretary-Generals: Mr. Rambal, a Swiss engineer from the Polytechnical school in Zurich, and myself. Mr. Rambal took care of the Technical Committees, and I took care of the administration and the relationship with the other international organizations. After eight months, the council nominated an English fellow, Mr. Sharpston. Mr. Sharpston was not an engineer; he came from the British electrical industry in Brazil, I think. After two years Sharpston gave up. Then Olle Sturen came in 1968. The real development was when Olle Sturen came. There was another spirit!

You know, working with ISO we had some good times. During meetings, it was serious – we were very serious! But once, there was a discussion at the Council (at that time there were 14 countries on the Council, maybe 25 people around the table) and a delegate expressed an opinion, and thought the others would be in agreement with him. Unfortunately, the President, who normally didn't ask for a vote (he was looking for consensus) said: "I'm sorry, but this question is serious and we must proceed to a vote." And everybody was against the proposal made by this delegate. So the President turned to the delegate and said: "Look, I'm awfully sorry, but your proposal cannot be maintained." We continued to the agenda, and the fellow became red, stood up and said: "And you call that democracy!" Very seriously. Nobody said a word. But one of the delegates stood up too and said: "Exactly sir!" Everybody laughed. Even the man who had said: "You call that democracy!" was obliged to see the joke.

I don't want to make ambitious claims, but I have a feeling that I contributed to the work of the organization, and to its development. I was very proud of my nationality. Joining an international organization, I had the feeling I was serving my nationality by being at the service of other nationalities. When I wrote a letter to a correspondent who didn't speak French, I always drafted it as simply as possible to give the person as much help as I could.