

THE WORK OF THE CENTRAL SECRETARIAT

“I’ve got the virus”

Roseline Barchietto

Staff member of the Central Secretariat since 1957



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Background

Roseline Barchietto has worked at the Geneva Central Secretariat for 40 years, from October 1957 until the present day. Convinced that “we were doing something that was useful worldwide”, she never left the job that she thought she would try out for six months, and has been part of the growth of one of the biggest technical publishers in the world.

In the year when Roseline Barchietto arrived, 15 members of staff were employed by the Central Secretariat. There are now 170 staff, drawn from 16 different countries. The annual budget for the Central Secretariat when Roseline arrived was CHF 340 000, and now it is CHF 29 890 000. Incidentally, the staff in Geneva owe a debt of gratitude to Jean-Claude Hentsch, ISO’s Treasurer from 1966 to 1971. By arranging for ISO subscriptions to be paid in Swiss francs rather than American dollars, he saved the Central Secretariat from the vagaries of the exchange rate.

As it grew, the Secretariat experienced several restructurings. In 1966-67, a period over which staff numbers were doubled, four Technical Divisions were set up at the Central Secretariat, with a newly appointed engineer at the head of each. Olle Sturen initiated a major reorganization in 1982, and there has been a recent “re-engineering” exercise in 1996. Growth has also led to the push for more space. In 1956, the Secretariat moved from its original pretty villa at Route de Malagnou (described by Roger Maréchal earlier in this book) to the International Centre in rue de Varembe. The fifth floor was occupied at once, and in the course of the 1960s ISO expanded to take over the second floor as well. In 1971, the Secretariat’s print-shop was moved to premises at Voie-Creuse near the International Centre, which were large enough to accommodate the entire department for the processing and distribution of documents.

Roseline Barchietto was among the staff who moved to Voie-Creuse, because she has always worked on what she describes as the “technical side” of

the Secretariat. Up until the late 1960s, the main technology she worked with included mechanical typewriters for letters, and stencils rotated on Gestetner machines for in-house reproduction of documents. Final Recommendations at that time were produced by external printers. By 1969, however, Olle Sturen could report to Council that changes made in the print-shop “should enable the Central Secretariat to print all ISO Recommendations in future, without resorting to outside printers”. An IBM golf-ball composing machine was purchased, soon followed by offset printing equipment. The production process has been revolutionized recently by on-screen editing and electronic work flow management.

Roseline Barchietto’s experience of technology was that “we were always at the very top” and that new tools “were very soon placed at our disposal”. Several factors have combined to encourage the Central Secretariat to innovate. One is the sheer complexity of the documents ISO is required to publish. Pages from ISO 31, Quantities and units, have been used as promotional material by Compugraphic to show off the potential of its photo-typesetting equipment. The Secretariat also has a certain responsibility to take the lead as the hub of an international communications network; one of Olle Sturen’s first acts as



Roseline Barchietto (seated, third from left) pictured here in the lobby at the International Centre with the delegates at the ISO Council meeting in 1959. Roger Maréchal is standing second left in the front row.

Secretary-General in the late sixties was to introduce the telex in order to communicate with national standards bodies. Naturally enough, ISO must also implement its own standards. Immediately after International Standard ISO 8879 on Standard Generalized Markup Language was published in 1986, the Secretariat introduced an experimental publication system based on IBM 9370 software.

Despite being surrounded by such technology, Roseline Barchietto's "virus" is not a computer bug. "To have the virus" is a phrase used at the Central Secretariat for people infected with enthusiasm for international standardization. As Roseline Barchietto is the longest-serving member of staff, she may well have introduced the disease in the first place.

"I've got the virus!"

I came to ISO in October 1957. I was 19 when I started. I had a diploma in German, and had just finished Commercial School in Geneva, and one day the school asked me if I wanted a job. "There is an international organization looking for somebody. Of course they need English, not German." My parents had agreed that I could go to Spain or to England to improve my languages, so I didn't need to work yet, but I said: "Oh, I will go for six months. It might be interesting." So I went and did a small typing test and wrote a short letter, and they asked about my English. I said: "Well, I learnt English at school, but only from books!" "It doesn't matter," they said. "If you can read it, and if you understand it, that'll do."

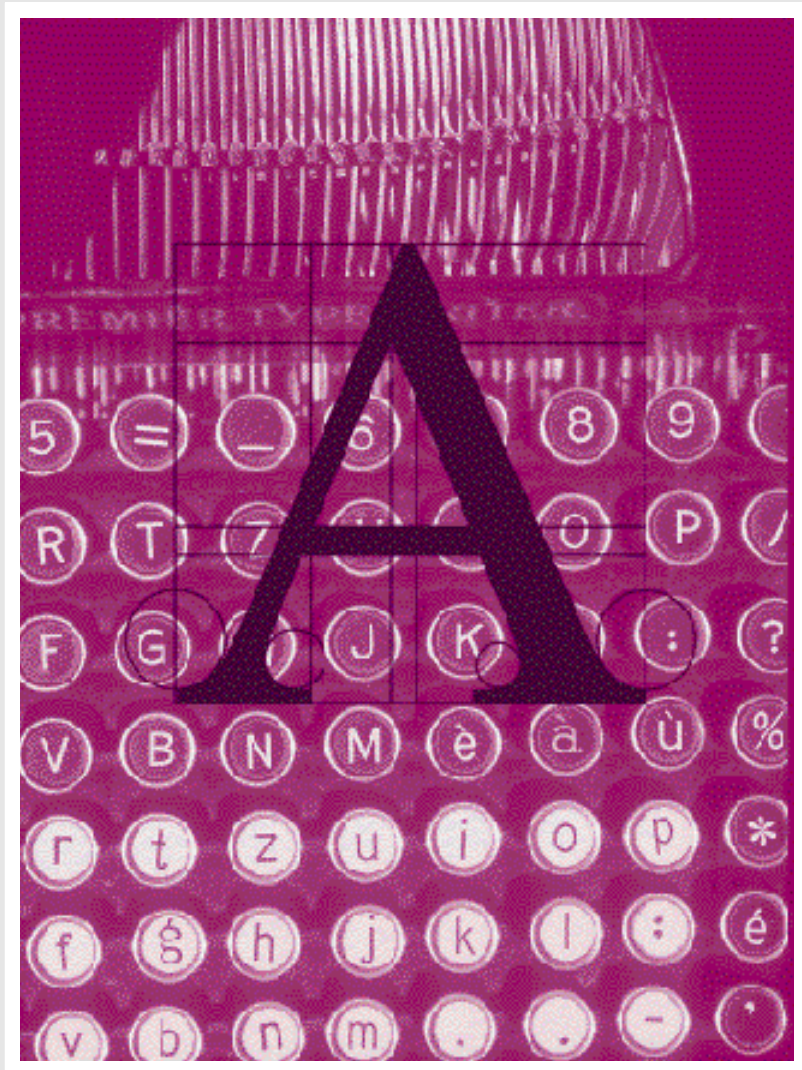
And it was so nice! It was very small, only 15 people. At school, I thought working was something difficult and stressful – I was very anxious! But, in fact, I was really surprised. Yes, we had to work, we worked a lot, but in a very pleasant atmosphere. The conditions of work were good too, from 8.00 in the morning to 4.00 in the afternoon (which was unusual at that time in Geneva). So in summer we were free to go to the swimming pool, or go sailing on the lake, which is nice when you are 19 years old. I thought: "It's a very good job! I don't want to go to school anymore. I'll stay here!"

First, I was just asked to do clerical work. After a few months, I became the secretary to Mr. Rambal. He was the Assistant Secretary-General for all technical matters. On the technical side, there was a boss (him), an assistant, a secretary (me), two or three typists, a translator, an editor, and a draughtsman. We were preparing the draft recommendations and submitting them to member bodies for approval. (There were 52 ISO Recommendations published when I arrived at ISO.) When the draft recommendations were approved, the final text was prepared

outside by the Technical Secretariat, and then we sent it to ISO Council for acceptance. The ten or more publications we produced per year were published at an outside printing office. This was the main work, and around this, we were typing the related correspondence, the notices of meeting, the agendas for the meetings, and the documents for ISO Council and the General Assembly meetings.

All this was so new and so rewarding. Not the job itself – the interesting part is learning every day about new subjects to be standardized. No – really! When you were 19 years old, particularly in those years, you didn't think of these complicated technical questions; that a screw thread made in Switzerland should be interchangeable with one in another country. I enjoyed my job because every day I was discovering new technical fields in standardization. Nowadays we have – I don't remember the exact number – more than 10 000 standards. You can imagine, I have seen all those subjects standardized: the common names for pesticides, nuclear energy, cinematography, rubber, containers, computers, and now quality and environmental management. I am interested in the things I am most closely involved with, such as the sizes of clothes and shoes, and the care-labelling on textiles. I'm interested in agriculture (TC 34) because it concerns fruits, vegetables, coffee, tea, spices – all those! When I had my first car in 1958, I remember that there were no symbols for the dashboard controls. When you drove another car you had to ask how it worked. So I was enthusiastic when we started the standardization of the symbols in automobiles. I have seen all these interesting things, because industry keeps requesting standards. I have got the virus! So I never changed – I never looked for anything else! I was convinced we were doing something that was useful worldwide.

After six or seven months, I was asked to go to the General Assembly in Harrogate. It was a very valuable experience which gave me an impressive insight into the world of standardization. All those important delegates from far-away standards bodies getting together in a vast meeting-room! It was very exciting. The downside was that the job was not very easy because we had a typewriter with an "English" keyboard, and the characters were not in the same place as we were used to. We had to type complete minutes of the meetings late into the night because we made a lot of mistakes. I remember my boss writing and writing, by hand, practically everything which was said. Then during the day, we were in the meeting-room distributing the documents and the resolutions. It was very interesting because we could follow the discussions. I remember the first time I didn't understand very much of what was said, especially about ISO's technical work or complicated procedures. In the evening we had cocktails and dinner, which was an opportunity to discover more about ISO's world.



Pioneering days with mechanical typewriters. But new tools were soon made available, and the staff were quick to pick up on new techniques to speed up production.

Outside, among my acquaintances, people had practically never heard of ISO. When I said that I was working in an international organization for standardization, I had to explain the role and scope of ISO because they always asked me about the plugs. It was something they found very inconvenient. They said: "Well, that's nice. So maybe in a few months, we will have proper plugs when we travel round the world." In fact, of course, we were standardizing in every field but electrical and electronic standards.

I worked as the secretary to Mr. Rambal, the Assistant Secretary-General, until 1967. The work was practically always the same, dealing with the preparation and publication of recommendations and the voting. Of course, the tools were different – we got better machines, electrical typewriters. At the very beginning we only had mechanical typewriters and the draft recommendations were typed on the stencil. Do you know what a stencil is? You typed on special paper to perforate it; then you turned it in a particular type of printing machine and the ink came through the letters. When you made an error, it was very complicated to correct. We put on a product like varnish which was coloured pink, and then retyped very firmly. If a complete paragraph was to be retyped, we had to cut and paste, and it took a long time. Of course we only had 20 or so recommendations per year, so it was OK. After that, we had a new photocopying machine, so we started to type on normal paper. That was progress! We have always improved. We were always at the very top. When new tools became available, they were very soon placed at our disposal. The telex was introduced very quickly, and things became more urgent. When you have a letter which takes 15 days to arrive, you think: "Well, it can wait. I will do it in a few days!" But when you have a telex, you feel obliged to answer immediately. You get to know the meaning of stress.

I had the privilege of working for ten years with Mr. Rambal in the technical department before he retired from ISO in 1967 (after 20 years of service). I had the chance to learn a great deal from him; he had great qualities, and was very capable and clever. He passed on some of his wealth of knowledge to me. After his departure, as the workload was increasing, the technical department was split into three groups with three Technical Officers. I became the Administrative Assistant of Mr. Allardyce, who was the Director of the Engineering Group. He was both an extremely human person and very competent. Then Mr. Sturen came as Secretary-General in 1968 and ISO took a great leap forward and started to grow very rapidly. He has a brilliant mind. You will meet him, you will see! He already had a lot of experience of standardization and a successful career in the field. Among other things, he was the Director of the Swedish member body. So he was – what do you call it? – a "standardization man".

The organization has changed and expanded a lot, but in fact the structure has not altered very much. There is still a technical department which processes the standards, and an administrative one. The difference is that at the very beginning one person (me!) was able to follow through everything from start to finish, and now the same work has been split up among different units or departments. Compared with 20 Recommendations per year when I arrived, we are now publishing about 1000 standards per year, so progressively over the years with each reorganization I have had to give up part of my work to my colleagues. Each time I felt a little disappointed, but after a few months, as things evolved and there were new challenges, the work became fascinating again. We are producing more and more, and we are asked to go quicker. The number of employees as such is not growing, but thanks to electronic publishing, e-mail communication, and documents coming on diskettes and being edited directly on the screen, we should achieve more and reach our objectives.

For my last four years, I hope to be in good shape to continue, and perhaps still see a lot of new technological developments. With the re-engineering that has taken place, I am training some of my colleagues to do the job I used to do. I hope to be less in demand after a while; every day people come and ask me questions. They know they will get an answer, because I try to make myself available. I also have (maybe it's not nice to say so) a good memory, particularly for figures, which is very useful with 8000 projects being processed. One of our bosses, our sadly missed Mike Leaman, always said: "I don't need to have a computer because I already have a live one!"

As for ISO, I am very hopeful for the future. Standardization is a fact; technical progress cannot be stopped. The next generations will certainly see new developments, and things will be organized in a different way, but ISO will continue! Over these 40 years, I have never found my work a strain. I have been surrounded from the first day until now by very valuable, capable and reliable people.