

“Love on a mountain top”

by Ian Pearson

Personal reflections on the German Scientific Glassblowing Society, (VDG) and Glassblowing Society of Switzerland Symposium 2018

Introduction

Apologies to Buzz Cason and Mac Gayden for pinching this title for my story as they, (according to Wikipedia) wrote the song with the same words. It seems most fitting to use those words in describing how over two hundred scientific and artistic flame workers came together on top of the Säntis Mountain to express and share the love of glass.

A full report with plenty of photographs is available both in the *VDG Journal* and on the VDG Website www.vdg-ev.org/info-portal/fachtagung-vdg-2018/ The following is my perspective.

Base Camp

My journey started at Zurich Airport where my wife Janice and I met with BSSG Chair Robert who looked quite awake considering he had spent all night sleeping on the airport floor! With him was BSSG Librarian Terri Adams and we were joined by Julia Malle, the glassblower from Hull University. We were all most grateful for Julia's linguistic skills in negotiating the correct tickets for the two trains and a bus to get to the venue of the symposium. Well I should qualify this as we did indeed arrive at the desired venue for Janice and I but as for the others in our party, well they were staying in alternative hotels which just unfortunately situated the other side of the mountain range. I almost forgot to mention a surprise companion who approached me on Zurich Airport rail station and asked if I was Ian Pearson. After a little hesitation as I was wondering why on earth would someone say that and could it be a trick! It transpired that Roswitha Krebs-Goldbecker; a German scientific glassblower recognised me (from my publicity manager?) and wish to join in the fun train. She of course was warmly welcomed aboard.

Camp 1

At the hotel which was the main venue for the symposium we relaxed by playing that old traditional game of SAD, (Spot A Delegate) before the barbeque. I spent ages trying to work out what we could eat in an understandable manner. Us British are terrible abroad aren't we?

Unfortunately we did sit too close to what I presume was an amateur politician who, as soon as he found out we were from the UK quizzed us about "Brexit"!

The barbeque was a great opportunity to meet up with old friends such as Jens, Tracy, Kon, Anja, Joe, Ron, Philip, Berto, Klaus, Peter and Barbara to name just a few. It's wonderful that the subject of glass can bring many diverse characters together.



Not "Barbie Dolls" at the Barbeque!

Camp 2

The first full day of the symposium saw me in complete confusion over what bus and tour party I should be part of. I had conveniently forgotten what tour I had pre booked but worked out that people wearing the same coloured name badges were gathering in co-ordinated groups of which I presume I had to join least I miss out. Question is which of the two BÜCHI factories will I end up at? Answer was the BÜCHI Labortechnik AG factory. The trip there was made most enjoyable for me as my conversational companion was Kon who I have known for years. Not only was it a pleasure to catch up with him but his English was perfect.

The most impressive memory I have from visiting the Buchi factory is one of cleanliness. You could eat off the floor with less germs than many restaurants I am sure. The attention to detail on checking each aspect of product manufacture was fantastic and accuracy really is the law here. I appreciate that many factories use many techniques to reduce costs of holding stock and perhaps Buchi's system is normal but it's the first time I

had seen shelves in the warehouse where nuts and bolts were in boxes on scales. Each time a nut or bolt removed the difference in weight was recorded and thus the amount of items in the box calculated. When a certain level of stock was reached the items were automatically ordered from the supplier. Fabulous ingenuity.

Of course the glassblowing was impressive and I was surprised Buchi have more glassblowers in the India factory than their Swiss home. Sign of the times I suppose. Next symposium trip will be India?

Lunch seem to arrive early and last long so I was grateful for sunny warm weather and many of the tour party relaxed outside and naturally posed for several variations of group photographs. It was a most pleasant surprise to suddenly spy an old BSSG Member Stuart Simcock walking towards me. It was over fourteen years ago that I had seen Stuart at the BSSG Symposium in St Neots, Cambridgeshire. What a small world eh?



Ian Pearson, Terri Adams,
Robert McLeod and Julia Malle



Representatives from just a few of the
many international glass societies



Stuart Simcock with Ian Pearson



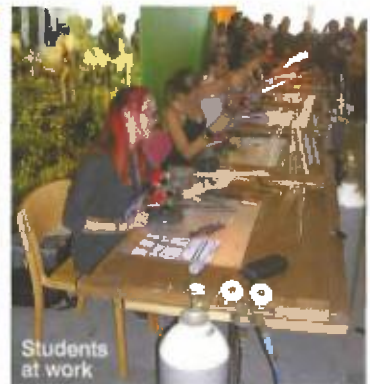
VDG President Peter Schweifel
with BSSG Chair Robert McLeod

Potential Avalanche?

Several key players on the tour, those that held office in various nationalities of glass societies, took a detour on the return journey from the various visits. This was to discuss closer working arrangements between all societies and the benefits that each member would realise by such action. Unfortunately I missed this potential life changing moment due to my keenness in preparing for my demonstration which was planned in a couple of hour's time on top of a mountain. I had yet discovered how I could fit all that I had to do into such a short time slot. It appears that this feeling was shared by the group that discussed the global formation and ease of communication of scientific glassblowers. I definitely can identify with the thoughts that we are all volunteers with limited time on our hands so we can only do our best. Compared to other activities in other crafts then I think we all do an excellent job, yet of course it's not a job.

I was disappointed to read an email on my return home to discover that the community of scientific glassblowers in Germany had decided to divide into two distinct groups rather than staying within one body. Of course this may have been discussed at the AGMs of the German Glass Society (VDG) and also the Swiss scientific glassblowing organisation. Drat I really ought to understand the German language.

Language was key at this symposium since so many nationalities were represented. I was fascinated how some delegates from Japan understood what I was saying. It wasn't that my Japanese phrases had eventually surpassed the word sushi but more the fact that a delegate standing next to me was using Google on his phone and showing the translation to the visitors from Japan. All very high technical I am sure but I did regret the opportunity to be allowed to mime.



Camp 3

I don't think I have been so glad at received my symposium welcome pack in the form of a rucksack as this came in most helpful to pack equipment for me to take up the mountain. Logistics were challenging in that my demonstration was scheduled for 6pm and the champagne reception followed by the banquet was straight after my performance. This left little time to change and certainly no time to run back to my hotel room for a makeover. As I was showing my method for creating rectangular tubes which involved much hot flames I was to put it polity slightly moist with perspiration. I know from previous experience that symposium held out with the UK are a more relaxed affair and that no one really dresses up for a banquet or annual dinner. In fact as long as one hides the burn marks on your tee shirt and wipe the carbon dust of your cheeks then you are smart enough to eat! I however wished to raise the game a little as had two presentations to organise. I ended up taking two rucksacks and two bags up in the cable car containing all I desired for the next six hours. Following the end of my demonstration I retreating to the nearest toilet and did a quick change of clothes. It was more blooper man than superman!

I thought my half hour show off on a strange (for me) burner went down well. I was particularly proud of when pulling a point deciding to run towards the video camera to save the operator using the zoom.

It was a privilege for me to present in person two certificates to Konstantin Kraft-Poggensee and Berto Fabilino for their contributions to the *BSSG Journal*. I knew of course they were the recipients which they didn't and especially fun to watch their faces as they were only sitting a few metres away from me.

One highlight of many was the glass alphorn testing. It was I think a competition where everyone who entered won. Seemed to me not many entries when one considered over two hundred glassblowers were eligible and I was told only fourteen did rise to the occasion. Of course my entry based on a highland cow drew amusement and miraculously one of the ban members extracted a noise from it which to my finely honed musical ears sounded like the mating call of indeed a highland cow.

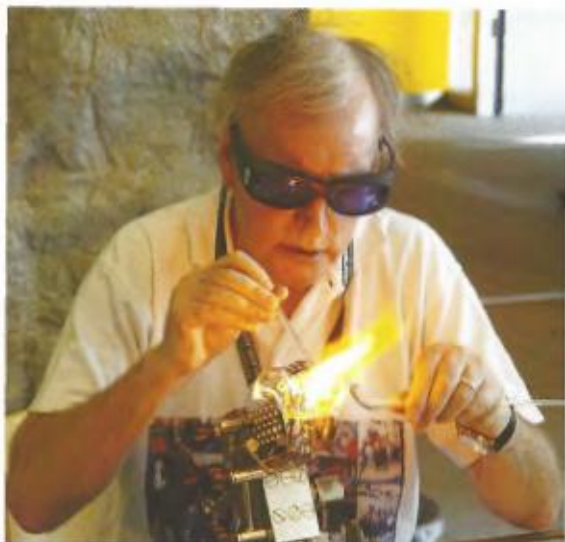
Did I mention the food? Well it was a fantastic buffet banquet but the cruelty of struggling to choose from the landslide of sweets was difficult to handle. However we did handle and handle well and goes without say we ate well.

Getting the cable car down the mountain to the hotel reminded me of rush hour at Piccadilly Circus. Not that there is a statue of Eros at Säntis but the crowd factor was very similar to the London Tube. Of course big difference being we were over two thousand metres hanging in space. On the same route the next day we stopped half way to pick up some mountaineers and that doesn't happen on the Tube. Well not at Oxford Circus, more like Tower Hill!!



Ian Pearson showing off!





Berto Fabbiano receiving his BSSG Literary prize from an overdressed Editor!



Kyle Meyer entertaining the crowds

Camp 4

The last day of the symposium was really a morning of watching practical demonstrations on the lathe and bench burners. I was amazed at all the equipment that was available. A long line of bench burners were in full use and of course all connected to fuel gases and oxygen. All the equipment had to be taken into a cable car for both journeys and I witnessed part of the dismantling of the mass of hoses, gas cylinders and extra equipment. I thought to myself as this was done in minutes that God could have used this technique when he "built" the Earth!

In-between changeovers of demonstrators on the lathe I did manage to wangle myself into a hand lamp position and once I found out how to turn the lathe on I spun out a large glass tube. It always amazes me that there seems multiple layers of hoses and connections combined with two or three foot pedals to burners mixing fuel gases, oxygen and air which all result in just one flame. I crave for simplicity and as I was working which knob to turn I felt like one as the inevitable bang occurred!

The line of bench burners was specifically for the sole use of students. I found this out when I tried to sneak in and use one burner. My explanation of being a mature student did not fall on receptive ears so I had to resort to an immature approach. After crying my eyes out I was allowed to make something on a burner at the end on the line of benches on the understanding that I did not distract the other students. Five minutes into my masterpiece the organisers started to switch off the gas supply. I pleaded for more time which was given and my result ended up in the student's collection for judging. I have no idea how my glass animal travelled over thirty metres from glassblowing bench to judging table. Someone must have pinched it?



Konstantin Kraft "whispering"



Glass Alphen testing centre



Klaus Paris




The hills are alive with the sound of?

The Summit

Then it was all over and a few delegates found their way to the top of the mountain. Yet we had already climbed the dizzy heights of glass greatness. I pondered as a helicopter flew past and I looked down at it. Illustrates just how high we were and as in those circumstances the only way is down. Janice and I were lucky enough to gate crash a birthday party being held in the local pub perched on the mountain side. To add to the celebrations we also gate crashed a wedding when we got back to our hotel.

The Descent

Coming back to earth translated in travelling back to Zurich and making sure we weren't overweight with free gifts from generous symposium sponsors. I decided to donate my alphorn to medical science or at least to someone who could actually ensure its function was achieved. On that note I will sign off. 



Ian and Janice Pearson,
Terri Adams with
BSSG Chair



Ian Pearson with
Astrid Salvesen and
Sebastian Sander