

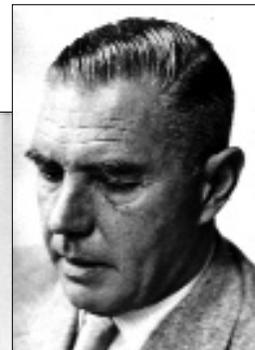
The Early Meetings of the International Commission for Optics

John N. Howard

*Representatives of the international optics community joined together in the wake of World War II to further the study of optics. OPN Contributing Editor John N. Howard traces the historical trends that led, in 1947, to the formation of the International Commission for Optics (ICO).**

In the summer of 1947, 15 optical scientists from eight European countries met for a week in Prague, Czechoslovakia, to discuss formation of an International Commission for Optics (ICO). In the plans of the group, the ICO would be an affiliated commission of the International Union of Pure and Applied Physics (IUPAP). The 15 drew up a set of statutes for the ICO and elected a tentative slate of officers, all subject to the approval of IUPAP. Since the next IUPAP congress was slated to be held in 1948 in the Netherlands, the Dutch delegate to the Prague meeting, Abraham (A.C.S) van Heel, a professor at Technische Hogeschool in Delft, suggested that the ICO hold its first meeting at his laboratory to coincide with the IUPAP assembly. To provide technical content for the first official ICO meeting, the 15 scientists who met in Prague had drawn up a list of optical research problems, assigning different ones to each country.

The ICO's first official meeting took place July 12-17, 1948, at the Physics Laboratory of the Technische Hogeschool. Forty-four delegates from 11 countries were in attendance. During the first session, Pierre Fleury, a professor at the Institut d'Optique, announced that IUPAP had accepted ICO as an affiliate and had approved the statutes that had been provisionally adopted at Prague. The appointment of the officers elected in 1947 was confirmed, and two additional vice presidents were elected:



(Above) Abraham (A. C. S.) van Heel, a professor at the Technische Hogeschool, Delft, was the first president of the ICO. (Left) ICO meeting in Paris in the 1960s. The ICO was headquartered in Paris. France was one of the 11 ICO founding member countries.

Stanley S. Ballard of the United States and A. C. S. van Heel. Thus, the 11 countries represented at Delft became the founding member countries of the ICO: Belgium, Czechoslovakia, France, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United States.

In addition to the sessions devoted to reports on the optical problems that had been assigned at Prague, the participants heard four invited lectures by: Maurice Françon (University of Paris, France); Thomas Smith (National Physical Laboratory, Great Britain); Deane B. Judd, (National Bureau of Standards [now NIST], U.S.); and van Heel. On the first day of the meeting, van Heel hosted a reception at his home. On the last evening, the group held a formal dinner. During the week, there were several visits to local research laboratories: the Kammerlingh-Onnes Laboratory in

Leiden; the Philips Research Labs at Eindhoven; van Cittert's collection of historical optical instruments at Utrecht; and the optics and electron optics laboratories of the Technische Hogeschool.

The principal focus of the meeting was the presentation of detailed reports on the topics that had been assigned at Prague. These reports occupied most of the six technical sessions. The delegates agreed that ICO should not act as a vehicle for publishing original research papers but that full use should be made of existing scientific journals.

The delegates also agreed that one of ICO's roles should be to sponsor conferences at which sets of invited papers would be given on an optics field or subfield.

At the final session, the new ICO president, Thomas Smith, announced that he had been authorized to invite the ICO to hold its next meeting in London.

*This column is adapted from a salute written for the 50th Anniversary of the ICO in 1997. For more information, go to www.ico-optics.org.

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The London Congress

Thirty-three delegates from nine countries attended the ICO's second general assembly in London in July 1950. The "Iron Curtain" had, in the meantime, descended on Europe, and the Soviet Union had imposed severe limitations on representatives from the Soviet bloc participating in meetings in the West. Although Poland and Czechoslovakia did not resign from the ICO—and continued (albeit reluctantly) to pay their assessments—their representatives did not attend the London meeting. This estrangement continued through the next Congress, held in Madrid in 1953,

but relaxed a little bit by the fifth, held in Stockholm in 1959, when Czech and Polish delegates, as well as observers from other Soviet-bloc countries, participated.

Except for the unhappy rift with the Soviet bloc, the London meeting was a great success. The national committee for optics of the host country had organized a concurrent London Conference on Optical Instruments, attended by about 250 scientists from 15 countries. From this time on, it became standard practice for the national committee for optics hosting each ICO general meeting to organize scientific and technical conferences to accompany it. This also made it

possible to hold, at the beginning of the conference, a session at which an agenda for ICO business was established and nominations to the ICO Bureau (the governing body) were made. The committees could meet during the week and delegates could discuss candidates. A final session with elections was held at the close of the conference.

At the Bureau meeting in London, van Heel was elected president of the ICO. One of his goals was to link the various European optics groups. His ideas included founding a European Optical Society or perhaps even a journal, along the lines of JOSA, the *Journal of the Optical Society of America*. These activities dominated ICO for the next few years. At the third ICO meeting, in Madrid in 1953, van Heel was re-elected president for a second term.

John N. Howard (howards@gis.net), founding editor of *Applied Optics*, is retired chief scientist of the Air Force Geophysics Laboratory.