

UN Group of Experts on
Geographical Names

Sixth Session
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Statement by the Chairman of GEGN introducing program
suggestions related to the Third Conference Agenda

It was just 20 years ago that I proposed at the International Congress of Onomastic Sciences in Salamanca that a beginning of international standardization of geographic names required only the acceptance of two simple basic propositions. The first of these was that written forms of geographic names can be standardized if the inevitable mispronunciations can be tolerated. All previous attempts at international standardization failed because they tried to produce written forms that would guarantee correct pronunciation which is not possible. You can't standardize pronunciation. A given written form will not call forth the same noises from everyone; no writing will draw from a person a pronunciation involving sounds that he doesn't know how to make. Thus, accepting mis-pronunciation is a very small price to pay for having standard written forms. As we proceed we will find that on various topics we are continually comparing the price we pay for the benefits we get.

The second of these basic propositions was that international standardization must be based on international acceptance of forms that are standardized by the governments of national states. An authority has to do the deciding and implement the decisions, and we have no higher authority than national states. At the same time it is obvious, and has been all along, that names are not the exclusive concern of the country where the named entities are. In order to have international acceptance of national standardized names, then the difficulties that are involved in this acceptance have to be eliminated or minimized by action by both the country that standardizes and the country that accepts. We need to know what these difficulties are to understand how they arise and to agree on courses of action that we can take together to minimize them. Thus there is required a recognition of common purpose and a joining in common action. It does matter to country A how names are standardized in country B; and the way in which transfers are made between writing systems matters not only to those who are immediately involved in a specified transfer, but also to everyone else. These are the basic processes by which we implement

international acceptance of nationally standardized names.

We have developed a machinery that has great promise, in my judgment. All the UN member states have accepted the two basic propositions. Three years after Salamanca, a UN program was drafted calling for meetings and machinery to bring appropriate people together to seek to find out what to do and how to do it to accomplish the basic objectives. Two years after that the original group of experts on geographic names recommended the conference that was convened six years later in Geneva as E/CONF./53. Fourteen of those who participated at Geneva are here today. In alphabetical order of their countries those people are:

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| Austria | - Professor Josef Brey |
| Fed. Rep. of Germany | - Dr. E. Meynen |
| France | - Mr. F. Nédélec |
| Guatemala | - Mr. Francis Gall |
| Iran | - Dr. Mahyar Nawabi |
| Lebanon | - Lt. Col. M. El-Ayoubi |
| Netherlands | - Professor F.J. Ormeling |
| Netherlands | - Dr. D.P. Blok |
| Norway | - Mr. Per Hovda |
| Thailand | - General Banlang Khamasundra |
| USSR | - Mr. A. Komkov |
| United Kingdom | - Mr. H.A.G. Lewis |
| United Kingdom | - Mr. P.J.M. Geelan |
| United States | - Dr. N.F. Burrill |

and from the UN Secretariat, Mr. Chris N. Christopher. So a fairly large part of our group has had a long experience together. While no one really wants war, war does sometimes provide a period of great technological advance because things are done without counting monetary costs; things are done from a consideration of survival. In the case of World War II this happened to names. The need for world map coverage of relatively large scale led to the creation of huge files processed by uniformed procedures. The Board on Geographic Names in the US expanded its name resources something like 2,000, fold in a period of just a few years. This provided a great reservoir not only of names but of expertise and it gave the opportunity to evaluate what was happening with

names in many different kinds of situations. All of the names and the expertise so accumulated and largely paid for during World War II and immediately after it has been offered in one way or another to the UN and to all countries that can make use of them. The needs that were stimulated by World War II when we were in a period of hostilities had been kept high by peaceful needs which were now infinitely greater than they were pre-World War II because of the far greater extent of large-scale mapping, because of the far greater involvement of all countries in the affairs of all other countries, enormously increased travel, and a concern with ways of living together that get exaggerated by the exponential curve of population growth. There is a pressing nature to these kinds of needs. It is popular at this stage of things to say that the world is in a mess, with inflation, with war and the threat of war, with domestic and international violence, with hatred and the preaching and the teaching of hatred, but there is also I'm sure a great reservoir of capacity for living together in something that approaches peace and common concern. We have the old adage that it is better to light one candle than to curse the dark. The experience that we have had with names has to me indicated that a relatively small number of people can exercise tremendous effect. I have always had faith that this group in its small way has a unique opportunity to show some ways in which cooperation can go on to everyone's advantage. This means we have to recognize this as one of the contributions that this group can really make. If one wants an example of how much can be accomplished without the use of force, one need only to look at world figures like Mahatma Gandhi. He was poor, without material possessions and frail of body, yet he exercised an enormous influence upon not only India but the world. This group has little in the way of power but we too can exercise tremendous effect by showing that we can do things for the common good. Some of the things I wish to suggest as a kind of challenge are based upon these considerations. In the agenda for the London Conference there were at the beginning procedural items - things that have to be done at the beginning to organize each conference. This has been followed at each meeting by a review of what has happened in the divisions and the individual countries. We will come back to organization of work and so on in a few days. The last item on the agenda of course will be the report of the conference. In between is the real body of the agenda, which will cover the items that we have worked on since the Second Conference

and ongoing programs. We shall ^{not only} assess the training courses that will have been held, but also project training course plans into the future and the relation of this to the total overall effort. We will continue our consideration of romanization matters, gazetteers, undersea and maritime names, definitions, extraterrestrial naming, and exonyms. We will have the report on country name. We might profitably look at the relationship of the Group of Experts and the Conferences in the whole endeavour. Within the Group of Experts the relationship of the working groups to the whole Group of Experts, I think, needs a careful objective dispassionate review. Convenors of working groups at this meeting have on occasion felt that the working groups had grown too large. Their meetings have tended to become mini-conferences, instead of informal discussions to hammer out something to present to the whole group for its consideration. A great deal of time has been spent in hearing all views at the early stage before ideas could have winnowed. We have encouraged wide participation in the working groups, but perhaps we should take a look at the consequences and balance the price we pay for the results we get. I think we need to look at how we constitute working groups to perform tasks assigned by the whole group and how tasks should be laid out and stated in terms of technical contribution to our understanding and to the extension of our cooperative endeavour.

I think we should continually review the integrity of what we do. I think to do this we shall have to make definite and conscious efforts to separate the contributions which we can make on the basis of technical knowledge and experience from anything related to political advantage. It is not always easy, but I think it is possible for us within the framework of the UN to demonstrate that technical people of goodwill can indeed do an objective analysis on the basis of which other people can make better and better informed political decisions.

Users of material produced by the USEGN use it with a confidence directly related to the EGN's own effort to point out both strengths and deficiencies in the material resulting from both the source material and from the techniques of processing. Perhaps one of the things we should look for as one of the

first criteria for a UN gazetter would be a complete frankness about what's in it. One of the very forward looking things that has happened with cartography in the last 30 years has been the reliability diagram, in which map makers indicate the character of the material from which the map was compiled. We ought to be frank in gazetteers about saying where the material came from, how reliable it is, and what problems were encountered in putting it together, so that the users of it can use it more readily.

I would like to see the members of the group of experts give some serious thought to ways in which they can persuade governments to reduce their fears of one another to the point where we can provide full information about names. The only way that you can accept somebody else's name standardization is if he gives it to you. This means providing names in quantities commensurate with any reasonable need and with locations adequate to tell where the places are. If any country still is fearful that this may be used for offensive actions against them I think this is a needless fear. I think it is needless because positions can be established by satellites without reference to coordinates furnished with reference to names, and if anything was going to be done along that line it wouldn't be done from names anyway. Unwillingness to provide accurate information on location involves a heavier price for some imagined degree of security than I think countries need to pay. It means that not only do other countries not have full access to the name and locational information, but also that people in the country itself don't have it either, and the peaceful needs for names and name information is another one of these needs that is rising exponentially. Fifty years ago the number of foreign names needed by almost any country was very small. It is now very large and it is going to get larger at some exponential rate. The experts ought to give this serious consideration, ought to look at what would have to be done within country A or country B in order to release the information on names that will be needed for everyone for the common good.

I think we have coming up within the next few years a most extraordinary opportunity. I have not mentioned to our new colleagues from China that this massive cultural change that is going on in that country provides a chance

for toponymists to study the effects of basic changes in language on nomenclature. This could provide basic knowledge and understanding of great value, and I would invite our new colleagues to think about whether or not we might in some way help them in such study and let them teach us, perhaps, some basic truths.

I think we are approaching a stage where we might usefully identify some potentially useful programs of toponymic research. We have been primarily concerned so far with problems of romanization and problems of relatively limited restricted content like certain types of names, or certain types of naming, or certain types of cooperation. To bring into some kind of focus the quantities of new information resulting from widely done studies we need more broad generalizations. I would like to see us become concerned with principles and the statement of them and the testing of those statements through continual revision and refinements. We now have enough names in many parts of the world to begin to draw very broad generalizations. We know that things happen in naming from country to country in similar ways even in quite unrelated languages, which suggests that we are dealing with some general principles of toponymic behavior. And since this is behavior that we are in large part concerned with, toponymic behavior, we need to think of it in terms of behavior more than we have done before. We need to know more about the factors affecting comprehensibility of names, how far names can vary from a norm and still be comprehended. How badly can a name be mispronounced or improperly written and still be understood in a given context? This is not going to be simple or easy, but it could be very rewarding. It might help us in some basic decisions. Providing this kind of understanding is going to require some collective effort. We should encourage contributions to this from any quarter, but we, perhaps better than any other group should be competent to state the problem and evaluate contributions toward its solution.

At the next conference we might well have as an agenda topic the divisional programs which from the very beginning, have been a basic part of the total effort. Divisional and interdivisional program success has varied considerably from one part of the world to another. It would be useful to have some comparative

study of the efforts, and a review of the relationship of the divisional program to the total.

At Athens I suggest that we begin serious consideration of how we shall deal with the information media. Up to now neither we nor the media have really been ready, I think. Our successes have been steady progress in understanding and patient resolution of differences. The media have tended to look for the controversial or the unusual rather than the most important or most basic things. What we consider fundamental they may consider commonplace and trite. I think we shall have to be prepared to point out to the media, with examples, the significance of the fact that in any standardization of names the final umpires are the people. It has been demonstrated many times that the people, given full information, will comprehend what is to their advantage, what makes sense, and will accept it. The people will not accept instructions or decrees or laws with reference to names that don't make sense to them even in countries that are under totalitarian regimes. Decrees with reference to place names have slipped right over the heads of people, who continue using the names they have used all along. We should regard the communications media as our avenue of communicating to the general public the essential reasonableness of whatever we proposed, and its advantages to them both as citizens of the world and as citizens of a country of a locality. If what we propose doesn't really make sense to everybody, then we need to look at it again, to see whether in fact this is exactly what we should try to do.

Research in toponymy is likely to shake some of your set of established beliefs. You begin finding things that you knew couldn't happen. You begin to find that some things that were mentally set in your mind, that were part of your basic structure of knowledge plus belief, must be modified. Now this is a humble kind of experience but a very enlightening one. Mental set is lessened when you recognize that you have it; then you can begin to see things that you had rejected because they didn't accord with what you believed earlier. This can be tremendously rewarding to people; it can also be so to nationals.