

EUROPEAN HEALTH FORUM
GASTEIN

Twenty Years

20TH ANNIVERSARY
1998 – 2017

*Dear Gastein friends,
dear participants,*

We are proud and privileged to present you the 20 years anniversary publication of the European Health Forum Gastein. With this book, we want to mark this special occasion by looking back to the beginnings of the Forum and portraying its development, by paying tribute to its pioneers and supporters, and by highlighting what makes the EHFG unique. We are grateful for the selected contributions of some of the many individuals who have helped shape and steer the association and the event, and regret not to be able to give a voice to all of them on these pages. Join us on the walk down memory lane, enjoy the personal stories of the people who have been crucial for the EHFG, look over the timeline to find the major milestones of the last 20 years, learn some EHFG trivia and enjoy some photos of the last two decades. Most of all, this is a big thank you to all of you for helping to make the EHFG what it is today!

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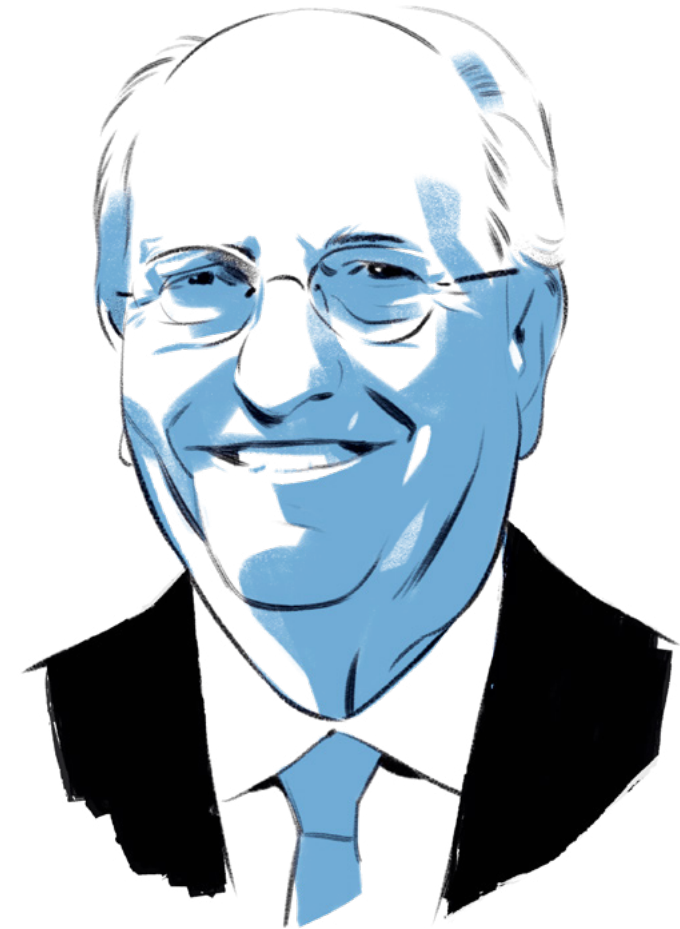
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Günther Leiner



EUROPE "AT A CROSSROADS" - WHICH WAY? *We sat down with the man who founded the European Health Forum Gastein 20 years ago. Back then, at the turn of a new millennium, Prof Günther Leiner talked about European health policy "being at a crossroads". He asked in his opening speech of the first EHFG whether we would follow the model of the USA, providing the latest medical treatment for few, or develop our very own, European approach. On occasion of the organisation's anniversary, he agreed to look back with us at the long way the EHFG – and EU health policy – have come since then.*

You are the founder of the European Health Forum Gastein. Tell us more about the vision behind the event. What made you, despite your manifold obligations as a physician and politician, choose to dedicate this much energy and time to such an initiative?

You could say that it was precisely because of my work as a politician and physician that I started the Forum. The basic, yet quite vague concept formed in my head years before the first EHFG took place. As a politician, I noticed that there was simply no forum focusing on health policy, facilitating the exchange of experience and best practice across borders. This was a real gap needing to be filled: health policy goes far beyond the concerns of individual nations; health is one of the common denominators of governments and people across Europe and globally. Maybe more importantly even: health is something we cannot sustainably secure in isolation from each other, but something we need to work on together. A formal, structured environment in which experts and decision-makers can exchange their views on current topics is thus crucial for our health systems.

Another important motivation to found the Forum was my inner conviction that all stakeholders need to have a say in the process of health policy decision-making. This is the reason behind the EHFG resting on four pillars: public and private sector, science, and civil society. My vision was to devise actionable policy recommendations for local, national and European policy-makers which fuse the experience of all these pillars.

So, these are the ideas behind the EHFG. But how did you move from theory to practice?

Well, to be honest: it became more concrete one summer day during the Salzburg Festival. Our governor Franz Schausberger had invited Commissioner Pádraig Flynn and his wife for lunch, but had to cancel and asked me to jump in. At the end of the meal we were on a first-name basis, he had assured me of the Commission support for an initiative like the EHFG – and the beginning of what turns out to be a lifelong friendship was made. The funny thing was: at that point I had no clear idea of what I was going to do exactly. But I knew I was going to do it.

Would it not have been more sensible, and easier, to have the event take place in Brussels?

In fact, having the initiative take place under national ownership was what made it so interesting for all parties involved from the beginning. The then Austrian Vice-Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel had suggested already two years earlier that we should try to lay the foundations for more activities in Austria which are meaningful beyond our own borders, which are relevant for other countries and for EU level decision-making. And the Commission saw a chance for us to explore concerns and ideas on behalf of them, and then play the output back to Brussels.

“This was and is my great personal pleasure and joy: witnessing how we have achieved to create an environment where our participants can comfortably discuss very concrete problems, while feeling at ease and having that bit of deceleration that is so crucial for taking a step back and getting a clearer view of things.”



“I have always been on the sunny side of life, and am very thankful for that. The Forum was more than a job for me. It was and is my passion, and I never doubted it.”



Still, it sometimes seems curious that such an international event takes place in a somewhat remote spot. The Gastein Valley is rather hard to reach, a quiet place, seemingly detached from the “real world”.

The Forum takes place in a valley, which is exactly why it is worthwhile undertaking the journey. Because there is no real opportunity for people to scatter, you actually meet them. You get to not only see the EU Commissioner for Health, but you get to know the person behind the position. This was and is my great personal pleasure and joy: witnessing how we have achieved to create an environment where our participants can comfortably discuss very concrete problems, while feeling at ease and having that bit of deceleration that is so crucial for taking a step back and getting a clearer view of things.

When you think of it, Gastein is quite an obvious place to choose. The valley has a long tradition in both health and European politics – many famous personalities have come here to benefit from the healing powers of the local thermal waters, and as early as during the Middle Ages international treaties were signed.

Now in its 20th year, the conference really seems to have proven its right to exist.

What was the key to success?

The people working on it. In the beginning, we were a very small team composed of quite a unique set of individuals bringing their very own skills to the table: Christoph Köstinger, my daughter Elisabeth Leiner, and myself. Christoph for example, who was on my side when first setting up the Forum, is actually a physicist by training. He is equipped with a very logical and straightforward way of thinking – an incredibly helpful asset when launching an initiative like the EHFG. His brother Martin has been part of the IT team since the beginning. Some of our shuttle staff has been working with us since day one. The conference is what it is because there is a lot of lifeblood in it. Another person who has worked by my side throughout the years and has been of tremendous support is the third EHFG Secretary General Matthias Schuppe. The EHFG board members, like Harald Gaugg, former Director General at the Austrian Federal Ministry of Health, have consistently provided a great backing and helped in a number of ways. I could continue this list endlessly.

Also, internationally I have always met with a lot of support, both in terms of advice and in terms of financing. The Commission has always been by our side, and so has the Austrian government and institutions like the World Health Organization. Without these, we would clearly not be where we are today.

In other words, the key to success is people – meeting them, getting along with them, convincing them that what you are doing is the right thing.

Yes. What also matters: you have to be true to yourself and act in all conscience. I have always done what I believed to be right, and had confidence that if I acted accordingly, everything would turn out just fine in the end. Most of the time this approach has worked. I must say, I have always been on the sunny side of life, and am very thankful for that. The Forum was more than a job for me. It was and is my passion, and I never doubted it.

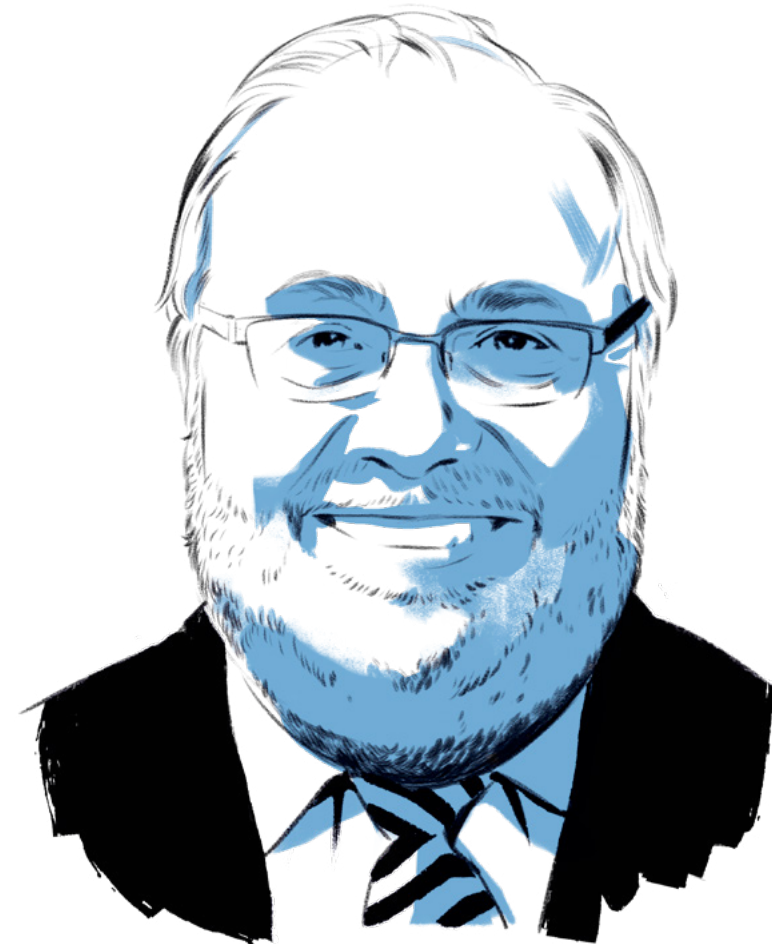
So, you have never questioned what you built?

Of course, there were rough patches, yes. But I never feared that I would be forced to stop the Forum, or that it was the wrong project to begin with, or that it had become redundant.

Back then, you said health policy in Europe was at a crossroads. Do you feel that we took the right path?

Basically, yes. But there is room for improvement. In my opinion, matters that have influence on health across borders should also be a shared responsibility across borders; what goes beyond the national level in terms of impact needs to be lifted on a European level of decision-making. The topic of access to medicines and HTA is but one example for this, you can name many more – from care for rare diseases to a common ethical concept in medicine. I am strongly in favour of a centralised, European approach to these issues. Otherwise I fear we will miss out on opportunities to advance matters of social justice and to catch up where there is a backlog, within and between countries.

Hans Stein



IN CONVERSATION WITH HANS STEIN *We talked about changing attitudes, (not) giving advice, and how a German civil servant ended up supporting the launch of the EHFG. Hans Stein, former Head of Unit “EU Health Policy”, German Federal Ministry of Health, was one of the persons backing the very foundations of the Forum in 1997, as part of his assignment to develop a meaningful EU health policy, and has been a highly valued consultant throughout the years.*

“The EHFG was fascinating to me because it was completely different to the EU surroundings I was used to. When I spoke in Brussels, it was not me, it was Germany speaking.”

What is the most interesting thing about you that we would not learn from your résumé alone?

Having been on the EU health stage since 1977, right from when the first Health Council took place – when there were only six Member States, when there was no EU Treaty and therefore no legal EU health competence – it was part of my job at the German Health Ministry not only to witness, but to contribute to the slow and difficult process of developing a meaningful EU health policy. I had to ensure that the activities were in line with national German interests. Unexpectedly, in 1997, the support of the creation of the EHFG during the first Austrian EU-presidency became a part of my job. Usually, it cannot be the task of a German civil servant to work for a project in another country. But the order to do it came from the very top, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. For many years, he came to Bad Hofgastein, to do something for his health. During his stay, he got acquainted with the founders of the EHFG. They told him their plans and he assured his support. What can be more in the national interest than to help the head of government to keep his promise?

Are you a EuroOptimist?

In order to have an opinion about the present and future EU situation it neither helps to be too optimistic, nor being a pessimist fearing the worst. I try to be realistic, basing my views on facts and experiences. For many years, the EU has been, and still is, in a very critical situation, resulting in the UK intending to leave. Quite surprisingly it seems that Brexit is bringing the remaining 27 countries closer together. The crisis has a number of different reasons, such as the fact that structures created for six Member States cannot function for 27, or the economic gaps between individual members and the financial crisis.

For a long time, health has been considered to be first and foremost a national task. National governments have jealously tried to prevent the transfer of substantial health policy competencies to the supra-national level. They have had difficulties accepting health policy as a matter of EU concern. Sometimes, it

appeared that health policy was one of the last retreats of national policy competence. These national views are changing as countries realise that many of their health problems cannot be solved at a national level, but need EU-level and sometimes even global answers, cooperation, governance and partnership. The best and latest proof for these changing attitudes may be that health has become a permanent item on the agenda for the G20 meetings.

What inspires you?

I am inspired and passionate about the EU, because I believe that the EU can give at least some of the needed answers. The specific legal health competence may be and may remain rather weak. But it has a worldwide unique instrument laid down in art. 168 in the Treaty of Lisbon as well as in art. 35 in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, namely the principle of “Health in All Policies” (HiAP). This is much more than just a technical instrument or an academic exercise, a cooperation or partnership. It is an encompassing legal base as well as a mandate, containing a vision which to my disappointment up to now has not yet been implemented sufficiently. On the contrary; some of the austerity measures to solve the economic and financial crisis have had negative effects on health and health systems in the countries concerned. It is my hope that in the future the needed health impact assessments will be made when – and wherever negative health implications are possible and that in the unavoidable conflicts between economic and health interests the health side will win, at least in some cases. There is more to politics – and life – than just the economy.

What advice would you give the young generation of today?

The younger generation does not need any advice, especially not from past and elderly actors. As the UK Brexit vote has shown, it was the old and not the young who voted for leaving. The young generation today may not have the same emotional feelings towards the EU that my generation has. However, it is quite sufficient that they accept it as a permanent reality. Criticism is not only allowed, but needed. Young Europeans travel, live, study and work in other EU countries, and they want to continue to be able to do so. They know the EU's benefits for their everyday lives quite well. It is not surprising that „Erasmus“ is one of the most successful EU projects. It is not the young generation that has to discover the EU, it is the EU that should give them and their needs more attention. The Young Forum Gastein network is a perfect example of how this could be done. A final word to the young: stand up, fight for and defend your interests when they are in danger. Make your voice heard.

What does / did the EHFG mean for you, personally and professionally?

The EHFG means a lot for me, both personally as well as professionally. Even after my retirement in 2002, I continued to participate for many years. I did not agree with all that was said but a forum without controversial debates is very boring. Sometimes I consider it to be too academic and scientific, that it covers too many public health research issues and does not give political topics enough attention, but it certainly never is boring.

The EHFG was fascinating to me because it was completely different to the EU surroundings I was used to. When I spoke in Brussels, it was not me, it was Germany speaking. My own views did not count at all. I had to present the official German position, which was the result of a lengthy struggle within the Health Ministry, with other Ministries, with the Bundestag and – often the most difficult part – the Bundesländer. I tried to influence this process, but I was not always successful. In Bad Hofgastein, I always felt free to say whatever I wanted to.

The EHFG debate I remember best was the one about the implications of the famous Kohl/Decker ECJ judgments in 1998 about patient mobility. They caused a major stir in the Member States, who feared that their cherished health systems were being taken over by the EU. Even the Commission was not sure about how it should react. It took a long time – 13 years, many conferences and even an informal Health Ministers Meeting – before the Council and the European Parliament agreed to the Directive on Cross-border Healthcare in 2011. And it took another three years for the Member States to transform it into national law. I am still proud that the EHFG contributed to this process, as it was one of the first – if not the very first – Forum that freely discussed the consequences of the judgments.

As this was also one of the first important examples of how a non-health EU policy – Internal Market – influenced health, it might be worthwhile for the EHFG to trigger similar developments in other areas.

Baldur Wagner



IN CONVERSATION WITH BALDUR WAGNER *We talked about morning briefings with Chancellor Kohl, the European process, and what a Ministerial Meeting meant for the EHFG. Baldur Wagner served as State Secretary under German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, and met the soon-to-be founders of the European Health Forum Gastein during a Meeting of Health Ministers in the Gastein Valley. He helped push the “start button” for the initiative and has been a supporter ever since.*

“There were times one even had to worry whether politics had not outpaced its citizens, whether we were moving towards a Europe without Europeans.”

What is the most interesting thing about you that we would not learn from your résumé alone?

Two years after Helmut Kohl was elected Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, a career dream came true for me. He summoned me into the Federal Chancellery, where I was appointed Ministerial Director, taking on coordination responsibilities for several ministries.

One of the unique experiences I made back then, and one I still like to look back on, was taking part in the morning briefings that were held at 8:00 each day in the Chancellor's office. These briefings formed the basis for many of the decisions taken throughout the day, both formally and informally. Strict loyalty was expected from the small group attending the meetings. We had to be on call around the clock, often until late in the night, and sometimes battling with the Chancellor's mood swings. This was a trying, but incredibly enriching period in my life. And knowing you belong to the inner circle of power compensates for a lot.

Are you a EuroOptimist?

The European Union has a future – despite all current problems, there are numerous reasons for and many advantages speaking in its favour. One of them is its contribution to social justice. True, its sociopolitical competencies are still limited; but thanks to the EU, the citizens of its Member States have the right to equal pay for equal value of work, to name but one important example. Another example are regulatory measures directly impacting citizens' well-being, such as the EU-wide ban on tobacco advertising. The EU is one of the regions with the highest social standards worldwide and a guarantee that even in times of globalisation, social achievements can be sustained. The dynamic of the European process will eventually also lead to a broader opening towards a European welfare state, with an increasing demand for European solutions in health-related fields such as nutrition, work environments and urban architecture.

What makes the EU unique and particularly worthy of preservation is its openness towards its neighbours – without occupation. The EU takes its neighbours in and gives them a fair place within the community and the right to co-determination. An experiment like this has not been ventured by any other group of states, and there are many nations in the world striving for European values, law and welfare. The EU also means a Europe without borders. Only we EU citizens are allowed to live and work in 28 countries without major hurdles in the way. This freedom, this privilege, is matchless worldwide.

And for those who want strategic considerations: in future, big states like the USA, China or Russia will determine the developments of this world even more than they do today. There is no place for sectionalism among the major players. For this reason alone, when it comes to safeguarding our values, when it is about democracy, law and freedom, European states will only be able to make their voice heard as a union.

What inspires you?

The making of Europe has accompanied me nearly throughout my whole life, and I am happy about what has been achieved in terms of a joined Europe – both economically and societally. These developments would have been deemed possible by hardly anyone 30 or 40 years ago; there were times one even had to worry whether politics had not outpaced its citizens, whether we were moving towards a Europe without Europeans. Luckily, the advantages of a borderless Europe, including freedom of professional and personal movement, are by now appreciated by citizens as an indispensable basis of their lives.

I was fortunate to work on these exciting European structures. For example, I was leading the German delegation negotiating the Schengen Agreement in its early years. Today, nearly every EU country is a member of this contract and the Agreement is one of the fundamental pillars of the EU.

Despite numerous challenges facing Europe, like Brexit, the recent influx of migrants, terrorist threats and financial problems, coupled with a supposed inability of European heads of state to adequately address these challenges, there is an improvement of the EU's reputation within Europe itself. A cause for confidence is particularly that young people stand up for Europe and appreciate the peace that has been created, the work opportunities and the mobility. This is a sound precondition for Europe further growing together. Europe needs the trust of its citizens for a positive development. To ensure that this is possible in the long run, the EU needs to considerably improve its communication efforts.

What advice would you give the young generation of today?

I am quite certain that future generations will find their own way, no matter which experiences the older generations have made. Therefore, I will refrain from giving concrete advice here.

Future generations will be more globally oriented and able to dispose of more information on life choices than our generation could. Therefore, I am confident that they will recognise the fact that conflicts between regions, ethnicities and religions will not be solvable by force in the long run, and act accordingly. Wars, natural disasters and famines with their horrible consequences must be addressed by political means, if the world is to experience sustainable peace. With this in mind, I wish the future generations smart and responsible politicians.

What does / did the EHFG mean for you, personally and professionally?

In 1997, Austria had – as part of the preparations for its EU Council presidency – invited the EU Ministers of Health for an unofficial meeting to Bad Hofgastein. I represented Germany, and met the Austrian delegate Prof Günther Leiner. Living in the town as a practitioner and health policy spokesman of the national Austrian ÖVP parliamentary group, he was naturally very interested in such a ministerial meeting, and we began to talk. I mentioned that I had been attending the World Economic Forum in Davos several times, and that I had perceived the events there as an extraordinary possibility to exchange thoughts and to learn. We quickly turned to the question of whether the Gastein Valley would not also lend itself beautifully as a location for a similar series of events. We came to the conclusion that yes, it would, and both agreeing that health was of increasing and international significance the idea of a European Health Forum Gastein was born.

I assured Prof Leiner of my support from Germany, since I could also count on the complaisant backing from Federal Chancellor Helmut Kohl. Prof Leiner was very enthusiastic, immediately met with the then chairman of the Gastein Valley Tourism Board, Franz Weichenberger, and began with the implementation of his plan. For further consultation, I received Günther Leiner and Franz Weichenberger on 23 December 1997 in my office in Bonn. Completely undisturbed, as the Ministry was nearly deserted right before Christmas, we discussed final details. Together they had in the meantime developed a plan for which they only had to push the start button. I am proud of Prof Leiner and his team for managing to put this by now so successful project into practice.

Andrzej Rys



IN CONVERSATION WITH ANDRZEJ RYS *We talked about Europe's best project, moving targets, and the perks of being a father. Andrzej Rys, Director at DG SANTE, European Commission, has contributed to numerous of the policy debates that have taken place in Gastein over the years, including preliminary talks about the Directive on patients' rights in cross-border healthcare. Eleven years ago, he was one of the conceptual founders of what today is a vibrant network for young professionals: Young Forum Gastein.*

“Whatever you thought you had fully understood and secured, there is always something else still to be discovered. This makes working in the field always interesting; I do not feel bored, ever.”

What is the most interesting thing about you – that we would not learn from your résumé alone?

I am the father of four beautiful children, three of which have each found their own way in life already. They are successfully striking the middle ground between what I call “to have and to be” – being innovative entrepreneurs and contributing to society. The fourth one is little Viktoria, and will thus be home for a few more years – luckily. I am extremely proud of all of them, and it makes me happy to see how they are progressing, each making an impact on society in a different field, but all as “normative entrepreneurs”, so to speak. Maciej has started “Smogathon”, and he is bringing innovative solutions to the global battle against smog. Anna works in Artificial Intelligence, has created the AI Krakow community and is also an actress, Michał is the co-founder of DrOmnibus, developing therapeutic games for autistic children and working in a charity for handicapped children. This fatherly pride is something you will find in none of my CVs, neither short nor long.

As a former director of Krakow’s School of Public Health I love to follow my students’ careers and I can witness after 26 years how planted seeds can bring great fruits – great moments for academia and for teachers. Another fact that may be slightly unusual is that I have made my mother’s profession my hobby – I really enjoy reading history books. It puts things into perspective.

Are you a EuroOptimist?

In order to work in a European institution, you have to believe in Europe. You cannot work there without understanding the values and principles behind the creation of the EU, and believing in them. You need to see why it still is the best project the European continent can have at this moment in time. I am an optimist through and through, but also realistic enough to rationally assess that European citizens are in fact still looking for European solutions, though maybe not always fully aware of it,

as the boundaries of what is national and European are not always clear today. As we see also in the current Brexit discussion, many citizens understand more and more how complex the system we live in is, and how much Europe is worth.

Why I believe in Europe? Well, I am of the conviction that in any development, there are difficult and good moments. Of course, the difficult moments can be very tough – but you know the sun will come up again. Also, now, there is more and more promising news about Europe, for example from election results in a number of countries, and countries that are struggling back to find again stability after the financial crisis. We already managed other, even bigger global challenges and I think the only answer for me as the son of a history teacher is that we need to walk together and believe in who we are and what we are doing. Finally, the EU is also about peace and freedom. I know this very well coming from Poland and my own activities in the anti-communist movement.

What inspires you?

My career so far has been a rich mix of different strands of experience – public health, medicine, but also regional development and innovation, and I have been passionate about all. I was with patients, working in academia, managed important reforms in the city of Krakow and on the national level, finally working in the Commission. What particularly inspires me in health is that it is like a never-ending story, in the sense that you always face new challenges. You may make some agreements, stabilise some concepts and developments. But then the next big question comes up because of science, or technological progress, or societal changes. What is absolutely incredible is that all these things happen in relatively short periods of time if we view them in the context of history. Just look at the developments in medicine in the last 20, 30 years! Incredible changes have happened in all the areas I just referred to, in technology, society, culture, in relations in medicine – new roles for doctors, nurses, patients. So, whatever you thought you had fully understood and secured, there is always something else still to be discovered. This makes working in the field always interesting; I do not feel bored, ever. Maybe sometimes, we are tired of not finding solutions, because the target is always moving. But this is no valid excuse for not keeping up the effort, for continuing to look for answers. I think we should be patient, realise that things are on the move, and admit that solutions are not all that easy to find.

What advice would you give the young generation of today?

My advice would be what I also keep saying to my children. First of all, be open. Secondly, look around. Sensitise yourself for the needs and challenges out there, but also for the solutions you can discover. Be clear about your goals, to yourself

and to others. And lastly, believe in all the things you are doing. Young people should avoid the quick gains in the sense that you begin your career feeling almost retired before you even started – no fun, no experiences, no risks, no challenges. You need to combine patience and passion in the way you do your job, and always keep looking for opportunities. The last thing anyone should do in my opinion is approach life thinking “I am going to be rich and make my fortune in the next year or two”, or even five years. Maybe I am wrong, because I am of course getting older (though not necessarily wiser), and these things are easy to say. But this is my experience, that the first thing in your life should be values and beliefs, and then the rest will come on its own.

What does / did the EHFG mean for you, personally and professionally?

I was in Gastein from the second meeting onwards, so really from the beginning, and have attended the Forum a number of times after that. What it means for me as a professional is that I have always found a place there, where I was able to have exchanges over important issues, and in different moments of my life a place where I could learn things, or provide my knowledge and expertise to others. Lastly, and maybe most importantly, it is a place where I could not only participate, but also have open debates in very important areas. From the years in the Commission, there were two particularly interesting moments. One was when the discussions about the Cross-border Directive took on momentum. Back then, the topic was growing, and people chose to either agree or disagree. It was good to hear all kinds of voices in Gastein, it helped shape the direction we took later on, when drafting our policy proposal. The second was also a quite remarkable moment, when Ilona Kickbusch introduced the concept of global health to Europe. This was almost a kind of starting point for my team to bring the concept back for discussion to the Commission, and we were finally able to develop a policy in this field. These are two examples, but there are many others, of course. The EHFG is also an important Austrian contribution to the European project.

From a more personal point of view, it was always great to see people building relations with each other, with individuals and with organisations. And to be part of this community – because this is what the Gastein Forum is, a community. I am particularly proud of the chance I had to be co-creator of the Young Forum Gastein, something that happened basically “on stage”, with Gabi Burgstaller, then Governor of the Federal State of Salzburg. This is exactly what makes Gastein what it is. It is not enough to simply maintain formal relations from a distance, it is important to also make the time to meet people in person, to get to know them, to make room for open exchanges and new ideas to develop.

Maria Rauch-Kallat



IN CONVERSATION WITH MARIA RAUCH-KALLAT *We talked about complementary medicine, taking on responsibilities, and what it means to be a committed European. Maria Rauch-Kallat, former Austrian Federal Minister of Health and now management consultant, was one of the first in a long list of Austrian government officials to support the Forum and recognise its value – as a European project under Austrian patronage.*

“We all need to set positive impulses, initiate and carry through showcase projects instead of building excessive bureaucratic obstacles. As yet, there are enormous inequalities; a lot remains to be done and we all must learn from each other.”

What is the most interesting thing about you that we would not learn from your résumé alone?

More than 40 years ago, when conventional practitioners had given up on treating the blindness of my then five-year-old daughter, I grasped for any straw I could find and began to fight. I made myself familiar with homeopathy, macrobiotics and many other alternative cures – and have at times applied them with great success since. This was what enabled my daughter to graduate from school writing her final exams in conventional black print with the minimal eyesight she had regained. It enabled her also to engage in activities other young girls do, and to get an education at the Federal Pedagogic Academy. Today, she is 47, nearly blind, and after many years of teaching at a primary school is now employed at the University College of Teacher Education in Baden. She lives (alone) in Vienna, likes to travel (sometimes also alone), enjoys skiing, ice skating, swimming, has a sailing license and started rowing two years ago. After dual Master's studies, she is now writing her dissertation on the situation of blind people in Austria.

For more than 40 years I have been observing both conventional and alternative medicine from a distance. And whenever ill myself, I start with the lightest treatment there is.

Are you a EuroOptimist?

I am a full-hearted European and convinced that the European Union has been the best and most successful peace project of the 20th century. I hope that future generations will not easily put at risk what has been achieved. The impending exit of the United Kingdom is bound to be an acid test for the Union.

Any committed European should tackle the multitude of tasks and challenges we are facing with great motivation and a sense of proportion to achieve improvements in income, standard of living, provision of healthcare and social

security in all Member States. We all need to set positive impulses, initiate and carry through showcase projects instead of building excessive bureaucratic obstacles. As yet, there are enormous inequalities; a lot remains to be done and we all must learn from each other. What is more, health threats, like for example avian influenza, have demonstrated that a virus does not halt at borders. The international cooperation worked excellently back then – also beyond the European Union.

What do you feel truly passionate about?

I would like to see more openness between traditional and complementary medicine. There is so much between heaven and earth that we cannot (yet) explain. A lot of age-old knowledge is buried or has even got lost. We need to take off the blinders in both our thoughts and actions, and allow ourselves to be curious about unusual things – and thereby get closer to nature again.

Each of us carries part of the responsibility for his or her health. “Mens sana in corpore sano” is just as valid today as it was back in ancient Rome. To listen to ourselves and our own body may prevent a lot of pain and suffering. This is something we should teach our children at home, in kindergarten and at school.

What advice would you give the young generation of today?

Like I mentioned before: To take one's own responsibility for life and health seriously and help those that – for whatever reason – cannot adequately do the same. We carry responsibility not only for us but also for our society and our environment – and the future of our world.

What does / did the EHFG mean for you, personally and professionally?

As Austrian Federal Minister of Health I took part in the Forum several times in the “second quarter” of these past 20 years, and was impressed by the variety of both topics and participants. The founder of the Forum, the health spokesman of the Austrian People's Party, Prof Günther Leiner, succeeded with this initiative not only to launch a project of such a big format, but also to further invigorate this amazing region in the Austrian Alps. It is surely thanks to him and his excellent team that the Forum has not lost any of its topicality and continues to enjoy great popularity. I wish the Forum the best of luck and success for the next 20 years.

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