

The story of my family and EURAG

In this short presentation I want to go over how EURAG got associated to Grund nursing homes in Iceland in the sixties and how my personal relationship with the EURAG family has been. In the conclusion I will ponder on what I think is the most important thing when it comes to taking care of the older population.

I was born in Reykjavík, Iceland in 1966, four years after EURAG was founded in Luxemburg. My late grandfather, Gísli Sigurbjörnsson, was the director of Grund Nursing Home from 1934-1994. Grund was founded in 1922 by my great grandfather and therefor we are celebrating 100 years birthday in October. Gísli was involved with the work of the EURAG early on, if not from the outset. I have not found the data showing that he was one of the founders of the association, since the first documents I have linking him to EURAG is from the year 1967. That year my grandfather went to a EURAG conference here in Graz on the 20th-23rd of September that was held in cooperation with ISCA, the International Senior Citizens Association, which was - and probably still is - an international association of older citizens in Los Angeles. I do not, however, know the extent of cooperation between these associations, but I heard my grandfather talk a lot about EURAG.

On the powerpoint behind me, you have seen the first letters between my grandfather and the president of EURAG at the time, Mr. Eduard Pumpernig. This was probably my grandfather's first EURAG conference, in the month of September in 1967. I find it very likely that he would have been elected to the General Council and later to the board of EURAG, even though I don't have the data to support this. But I do remember hearing my grandfather talking about this outstanding association ever since I was a teenager. Later, when I started my career at Ás Nursing Home in Hveragerði, in the fall of 1990, he talked to me about the importance of EURAG and encouraged me to be an active member of the association. My grandfather regularly went to EURAG meetings and conferences and without a doubt put his mark on how elderly care in Europe developed in those years. He was a very prolific manager, saw great opportunities in elderly care and, in fact, he was way ahead of his time in this field.

It was in February 1988 that my grandfather sent Mr. Pumpernig a letter saying that he could not come to more EURAG meetings because of his failing health. He sent his best wishes to everyone in EURAG, that he had had the good fortune to work with throughout the years, who were many, without a doubt.

Like I had mentioned earlier, I started my career in this field in the fall of 1990 when I became the managing director of Ás Nursing Home in Hveragerði, only 24 years old. I got to work with my grandfather for two years and he was an excellent mentor. He died in January 1994, 87 years of age, after having served as the director of Grund for 60 years. My mother took over his duties at Grund nursing home, but foreign cooperation was not in her comfort zone and therefore she was never an active member of EURAG.

My first experience with EURAG was when I met Gerhard Haag for the first time in September of 1994 in Bodenrod. At the time, he was in the General Council of EURAG and had been an active member for a number of years. On this trip I visited a few nursing homes and got to know how they were operated. I was not fluent in German, had only taken a few courses at College, and I remember it being very tiring to speak and to listen to German from morning to night for three days. Gerhard did not speak much English, or did not want to do so. But he encouraged me to become an active member of EURAG, as my grandfather had done before him.

His words of encouragement led me to go on another visit to Germany where I really examined the way German rehabilitation nursing homes were operated. I stayed in Germany for two weeks at the end of May and beginning of June 1996. The visit concluded with a big EURAG conference in Berlin from 13th-15th of

June. At the conference I met Haag again as well as the president of EURAG at the time, Mrs. Emée Mangers-Anen from Luxemburg. I was elected to the General Council at the General Meeting and here I am, more than 26 years later, still in the General Council.

I was very well received at my first meeting at the General Council. Most of the representatives had known my grandfather and they really appreciated his input to elderly care in Europe. I understood that he was held in high regard since he had been a visionary in the field of elderly care. What pleasantly surprised me, however, was the care and affection that I felt from the EURAG representatives and others at the meeting. It was like being at a family reunion, meeting old aunts and uncles or even grandmothers and grandfathers. At the time, I was by far, the youngest representative in the Council meetings, only 30 years old, and I could easily have been the son or even the grandson of most of the members. I am still among the younger ones in the Council, even though it has been 26 years since my first EURAG Council meeting.

I have personally got to know a lot of individuals who are involved with elderly care in Europe and I treasure those relationships. Me and my wife Alda stayed with the late Eric Reed in Prague and we really enjoyed our time there. Then me and my wife, have travelled quite a lot with our very good friends the president of EURAG, Dirk Jarré and his wife Anneli, and I remember especially an

unforgettable trip to Sicily a few years ago. We have also had a great relationship with Dana Steinova and Jaap van der Spek, just to name a few.

But I have not only been a member of the General Council. I was elected the president of EURAG on the 14th of September 2007. At that time the association had problems with a settlement of debts to the European Union because of a grant that EURAG got for a research project, but part of the amount had been used for daily operations of EURAG. Basically there were no ready takers for leadership of the association at the time, but I felt I owed it to my grandfather's memory to step up and try to solve the financial problems of the association. In short, I was able to get the whole debt of 55.222,87 EUROS as well as the late payment interests cancelled, and thereby the future of EURAG was secured. I was the president of EURAG until 2011 when my dear friend Dirk Jarré took over.

On top of meeting so many good, warm and outstanding individuals in EURAG, me and my wife have had the opportunity to travel to places in Europe we would probably not have done if it wasn't for EURAG. Of all the good places we've been to, I think that Israel and Russia, were the countries that we found most memorable and most interesting to visit, especially in the light of the current situation where visits to Russia could now be impossible for the next years or even decades to come.

Finally, I want to talk about the purpose of life. We all have a purpose in our lives, although it can manifest itself differently and also how we approach the idea of purpose in our lives – how we spend our lives. On that thought I remember what my grandfather taught me in my first years in elderly care. He told me that everyone needs to have a purpose in life, something to live for. I realized soon, that when an individual starts living in a nursing home, they become the receiving party in their own lives. They are no longer in the job market. They are no longer caring for their children or other family members. They are no longer running a home. They no longer cook their own food. They need assistance in their daily routines, like bathing and other things that we, who are still healthy, never think about because we feel it is just an easy part of daily life.

This huge transition of leaving life where you take care of everything yourself into a new life where others take care of everything for you, can have a huge emotional impact on people, and often it is a negative impact. We, who work with the elderly population, and especially those, who need to spend the last months of their lives in nursing homes, need to be aware of this and do our utmost so that people can live gracefully as long as possible. Part of that is allowing them to do the things they are able to do and give them the opportunity to give something of themselves as much as possible, so they are not simply passive receivers in their lives.

I always remember something that happened at Mörk Nursing Home a few years ago. There was an older man who had been a member of Parliament, had been a Minister and a bank manager in the last years of his career. He was a strong individual who had always worked hard, but at this stage in his life he needed a lot of assistance with his daily routines. On the first floor of the Nursing Home is a little coffee house, where you can buy coffee and cakes. The former member of Parliament had invited two of his friends for coffee on this particular day. They could have been served coffee and cakes at his ward for free, but he chose to go rather to the coffee house. When it came to paying for the coffee, he held his credit card high up and said in a loud voice: “Here I am paying,” with a big smile and I could see the happiness and pride in his face. It was a very revealing moment for me. I felt that it was his way to counter his need for assistance ever since he moved into the nursing home where he was mostly dependent on others for everything.

This epiphany changed something for me and I have in my work with the elderly made a point of allowing the residents of nursing homes to give something back so they can feel they have some control and get some glimpse of their old life back. I strongly believe that having a purpose, giving back and having some form of control is one of the key elements in the wellbeing of people.

In the end I want to thank all of you here for this good opportunity to speak at this beautiful anniversary meeting of EURAG. Let us all congratulate EURAG on this

60-year anniversary for all the good work we have been doing. Hopefully, the next 60 years will be as fruitful and inspiring for all of us who are in the field of elderly care in Europe.

Thank you

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