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*From Olga Froebe-Kapteyn to the Amici di Eranos.
On the history of the Eranos-Tagungen at Ascona*

There has always been a certain contradiction in the concept of an *Eranos*. For it refers to the experience of a gathering of people that is meant to follow only the free flow of social and intellectual creativity and to be quite distinguishable nevertheless in the spheres of time, space, scholarship, and society. A number of persons, loosely connected with each other as the term "circle" indicates, are imagined to come together, under the ideal conditions of leisure and in surroundings suggesting a festive event. They are to enter into a conversation whose chief characteristic is its openness, as it is enacted and carried on in no other way than through a free play of insights offered and found. To be sure, a gathering of this kind could never take place, in the practical world if it would not be made real by being given a distinctive form in the way indeed of an *organized* event that is well *defined* through its participants and such things as the dates fixed for its beginning and its ending, the location, a timetable, a list of speakers, the order of the debates and rules for its procedure. An *Eranos* needs to be the subject of a good deal of planning and organization, else it will remain a thing of the imagination. And yet, it is precisely the imagined event – a gathering of people meant to follow only the free flow of social and intellectual creativity – from which an *Eranos* starts.

Throughout their history, the *Eranos Tagungen* at Ascona – as only one "Eranos" among others in the long tradition of the *Eranos movement* – were marked by this tension. Olga Froebe-Kapteyn (1881-1962), who initiated them in 1933 and directed them for almost thirty years, undertook every effort to have "her" *Tagungen* emerge from the event, and not from an organization. Ideally, in her view, the participants in a *Tagung* performed it in the way of a "play" on a stage or of a piece of music, a "fugue". Surely, she did much planning and organizing. Every year she set the dates at which the meeting would be held, drew up a program including a timetable, had it printed, and sent it, with her formal invitation, to those whom she wished to attend. And she did give the *Tagungen* quite a definitive form, though after the event, by means of the book into which the lectures given every year at a *Tagung* were assembled. On the other hand, however, setting up the *Tagungen* was her personal affair. She provided the space for them on her private property, only she invited to the *Tagungen*,

and she presided over them. She peremptorily decided who would be allowed to attend and who would not - lecturers who displeased her weren't admitted any more. Her personality and her style in being the hostess were the catalysts for the "event" that was intended to emerge: the "dance" of creative minds. What could be seen as a personal regime was indeed a safeguard against a formalization of the *Eranos* that shouldn't be formalized by all means. Typically, Olga Froebe-Kapteyn wasn't thinking of a series of *Eranos Tagungen* when she invited people for an *Eranos* at her home in 1933. The meaning of the event was precisely this: the event which did not necessarily include nor call for the idea of a sequel. That the *Eranos* meetings held at Froebe-Kapteyn's estate in 1933 and again in 1934 developed eventually into a continuous series was not the result of any planning or working towards a long-term project. The *Tagungen* themselves made the participants, and Olga Froebe-Kapteyn especially, understand that, in having a great significance of their own, they should be continued.

This led to the wish that the series of the *Tagungen* should be maintained after her death. On August 25, 1961 Olga Froebe-Kapteyn wrote up a last will, by which she (a) founded an *Eranosstiftung* (Eranos Foundation), (b) determined its objective – "annual *Eranos Tagungen* held in the same spirit as I have led them since 1933, and the publication of the lectures in the form of *Eranos Yearbooks*" - , and (c) appointed Adolf Portmann (1897-1982) as sole executive of the foundation.

Within the field of force between "event" and "organization" a major move had been made towards the latter. An institutional form for the *Tagungen* had proved to be necessary to keep them alive in the practical world. And the act of institutionalizing them in 1961 was accompanied by an act of definition: "*Tagungen held in the same spirit as I have led them since 1933*". Nine years later, in 1970, the meaning and the aims of the *Tagungen* were further defined in a legal document. As to the juridical control of its activities, the *Eranosstiftung* had at first been supervised by the County of Basle. In 1963 this supervision was transferred to the County of Ticino. Now, in January 1970, the Swiss Department of the Interior in Bern issued an ordinance by which it was determined that the *Eranos Tagungen*, in view of their "international character", would be put under its authority. Among the legal provisions, this document includes passages which define very precisely the objectives of the *Eranosstiftung*: "The Foundation has the purpose annually to hold *Tagungen* in the fields of the sciences of religion, the humanities, and the natural sciences." – "The research fields dealt with [at the

Tagungen] are the science of religion, art history, classical philology, psychology, biology, musicology, physics, gnosticism, jewish mysticism, Zen, as well as protestant and catholic theology".

Plain words, legally binding. And yet – did they help on the evening of August 24, 1988? No, they did not. Another *Eranos Tagung* was drawing to a close, and Rudolf Ritsema (1918-2006), the successor of Adolf Portmann in the position of the *Eranosstiftung*'s sole executive had asked the speakers at the conference to come together after dinner in a library room of the *Casa Gabriella*. Tomorrow, with Erik Hornung's lecture in the morning, the *Tagung* would be concluded, and people would depart. So this evening was the last moment when the speakers could assemble. Coming together for the meeting, they assumed that the purpose of it was to discuss, as at similar meetings in the years before, topics for the *Tagungen* in the years ahead and lists of possible speakers. What they were told instead, when Ritsema, as its chairman, opened the meeting, utterly surprised them. It came as a shock: Curtly, Ritsema stated that this had been the last *Eranos Tagung*. No further *Tagungen*, he said, would be held. He didn't provide any reasons or any evidence that possibly could have justified such a grave "historical" decision. Nor did he invite the speakers present to discuss or to comment on it. They just had to witness the fiat: This is the end of the *Eranos Tagungen*, Ritsema said, adding though, quite in the way of an aside, that from now on he would devote "himself" (he didn't say the "Eranosstiftung") exclusively to the Chinese divination manual, *I Ching* or "Book of Changes".

Rudolf Ritsema's words stunned the assembled speakers into a long silence, which finally was broken by two of them: Gilbert Durand and Tilo Schabert. The former, in his role as doyen of the "college" of Eranos speakers in recent times, protested against Ritsema's announcement in very strong words, refused to accept it, and spoke of "betrayal". The latter argued that the *Eranos Tagungen* had their own life and didn't belong to any one, hence no one among the people who were involved in them had any right to put an end to them. Before any further words could be spoken, however, Ritsema closed the meeting. Arrangements had been made for a piano concert this evening to be given by Cathérine Ritsema, Rudolf Ritsema's wife, in the Ritsema's spacious living room at the *Casa Eranos*. It was time to go there, Ritsema reminded the speakers. It seemed that he wanted to avoid, by ally means, a deliberation on the fate of the *Eranos Tagungen* by the *Eranos* community.

True, very true, indeed, as one could see the next day. Erik Hornung delivered his lecture on *Echnaton*, in acting as if nothing had happened. However, as he concluded the lecture, he announced the news of Ritsema`s intention to put an end to the *Tagungen* and, in sharply criticizing the bias in Ritsema`s action, he added the statement: "The fundamentalism, which heaves up its head everywhere today, has no future. For Echnaton teaches us, and history, the most infallible of all oracles, teaches us: it is always the whole that concerns human beings, every one-sidedness leads into a void and must necessarily fail. Eranos has lived by the idea of the whole in the plurality of human reality and will continue to live where this whole is seen and realized." Stunned, like the speakers at the evening before, the audience remained at first deadly silent, but then people started to stand up, shouting words of protests and indignation. An uproar developed. However, a certain *mise en scène* worked. The speakers with their partners were lodged on the estate of the *Eranosstiftung*, but all the other people attending the *Tagungen* were staying elsewhere, at Ascona or other places nearby. Therefore, a bus service had been arranged to bring them from Ascona to the estate and back. Rudolf Ritsema saw his chance to bring the turmoil to a quick end: "The buses have arrived", he called out, "they depart in five minutes!" And the lecture hall emptied ... The *Eranos Tagung* of 1988 had ended. Would the series of *Tagungen* end as well?

No. Before they departed and travelled home, a number of people – speakers and participants from the audience – had hurriedly spoken to each other and exchanged views. Rapidly a consensus emerged: whatever could be done to make a continuation of the *Eranos Tagungen* possible ought to be done. As a result, in the fall and winter of 1988 a network of contacts was built up that was formed by people who had witnessed the incidents of August 24 and August 25 and by Eranos speakers and participants in the *Tagungen* from former years. The numerous letters and memos which in 1988, 1989, and 1990 were exchanged within this wider circle – it practically made up the Eranos community of that period - are now historical documents (as equally the letters of disapproval written to Ritsema by a number of Eranos speakers). They express essentially four points:

- (1) We are outraged and saddened.
- (2) The "decision" of Rudolf Ritsema, seen from the point of view of the Eranos community, is illegitimate. And it is contrary to the provisions in legal documents, among them especially the last will of Olga Froebe-Kapteyn, that define the objectives of the *Eranosstiftung*.

- (3) It is our judgment and experience that Eranos has taken on an autonomous life of its own during its fifty-five year history. It has come to be something well beyond the intentions of any individual, something far more important even than those of Olga Froebe-Kapteyn foresaw. In the light of this autonomy of Eranos, we serve it. Its future destiny as an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural forum is crucial at the end of the twentieth century.
- (4) We enthusiastically encourage and decidedly support the efforts towards a continuation of the *Eranos Tagungen* in a renewed form.

The story of the "Amici di Eranos" and their new cycle of *Eranos Tagungen* had begun. But before it will be sketched out (a full history of the new cycle cannot be given here, it would need a book), some more information regarding Ritsema's act on August 24, 1988 ought to be given. (a) The *Eranosstiftung* was at that time heavily indebted. Since 1962, when a first loan to the amount of 250 000 Swiss Francs had been taken on its real estate property, the foundation increasingly depended, in order to have the *Tagungen* held and quite simply to exist, on the borrowing of money. It received donations, and people paid fees to attend the *Tagungen*, but the debts nevertheless continued to accumulate. A seemingly desperate financial situation, among other things, might have motivated Ritsema for his act. But it should be noted at once that the debts of the foundation didn't diminish, after the *Tagungen* had been stopped. On the contrary, they grew further, on a heavy scale. (b) The legal construction of the *Eranosstiftung* was somewhat peculiar. It was supposed to be led by an "Executive Committee" (*Stiftungsrat*), hence, one would assume, by a body being composed of a number of persons. However, in the case of the *Eranosstiftung* the *Stiftungsrat* consisted of just one person. Therefore, the will of Rudolf Ritsema, in strictly legal terms, could be held to be equivalent to a resolution of the *Eranosstiftung*. (c) Subsequent to his act, Ritsema at different occasions presented different reasons for it. In the report he made in 1989 to the *Stiftungsbehörde* (the Authority supervising Swiss Foundations) for the year of 1988 he declared that he wanted to make a pause in the business of the *Tagungen* in order to look out for a successor who would take over from him the direction of the *Stiftung* and to clear up the foundation's financial situation. Some time before, in the fall of 1988, however, he had mailed a general announcement of an Eranos-"Project" centered on a translation of the *I Ching*. He claimed the entire *Eranosstiftung* for this project (and, as it turned out, succeeded with it). Evidently, the "organization" had replaced the "event".

By contrast, there were a few enthusiasts who in the winter of 1988 and the spring of 1989 actively worked for a renewal of the *Eranos Tagungen*. Carried on by the support and encouragement of the orphaned Eranos community, from which valuable advice was also forthcoming, and inspired by a great sense of pure and joyful creativity, they set about to seek practical ways and means for a continuation of the *Tagungen*. Only the "event" was in their mind, and not any "organization". What there was in fact in terms of an "organization", in fact consisted of no more than a small file in a briefcase. The *Eranos Tagungen* at Ascona were never so close to the "imagined event" as at that time. Two persons played then a major role in Ascona: The first was Edgar Bieri, a medical doctor in Ascona and a friend of Gilbert Durand's. Upon the request of the latter, he sought help from public authorities and indeed found some through Fabrizio Vacchini, a lawyer, who was a member of Ascona's Town Council and the current director of Ascona's Tourist Office. Vacchini held out an organizational and financial support by the Tourist Office. The second person was Ingeborg Schnetzler, from Munich, who for many years had attended the *Tagungen* and had come to know and to befriend, thanks to her culture, curiosity, sensitivity and charm, numerous people in Ascona (among them Edgar Bieri). At several stays in Ascona, in February, April, July and September 1989, she effectively formed a nucleus of people who committed themselves to the launching of a new cycle of *Eranos Tagungen*, and she conferred with Fabrizio Vacchini on his offer of support.

To consolidate all the initiatives taken, a meeting was fixed for February 11, 1989 at the hotel Al Porto in Ascona. It was attended by 12 persons, among them Nello Broggini, the official in charge of cultural affairs in the Municipality of Ascona, Edgar Bieri, Erik Hornung, Magda Kerényi, Marianne New, Tilo Schabert, Ingeborg Schnetzler, Fabrizio Vacchini. At that meeting the decision was taken now to enter into formal negotiations. The "friends of Eranos" (still just an informal circle) should treat with the public authorities (the Municipality of Ascona and Ascona's Tourist Office). It was also decided (a) to begin with the preparations for a first *Eranos Tagung* in the new cycle, to be held on August 19-26, 1990 on the theme of "Resurrection and Immortality", (b) to renew thoroughly the style of the *Tagungen* and (c) to inform the Swiss Department of the Interior at Bern of the developments since August 1989 regarding the *Eranos Tagungen*. A communiqué was sent to the local newspapers to convey to the public these decisions. In a formal letter Nello Broggini, as representative of the Municipality of Ascona, on February 14 confirmed: "Le *Tagungen* debbano continuare. – The *Tagungen* have to continue." On the same day he sent a letter to Giuseppe Buffi, the head of

the Department of Public Education in the Government of the County of Ticino, in which he affirmed too that the Eranos Encounters had to continue.

A letter mailed in August 1989 to all members of the Eranos community provided a further strong impulse to the renewal. Not only did very many people respond enthusiastically to the news about the possible continuation of the *Tagungen*, but a great number of them also stated that they intended to attend the new conference in August 1990. And in the following two months the commitment of the Tourist Office became ever more strong. This made the "event" (of an *Eranos Tagung* again in August 1990, after which further *Tagungen* every year would follow) much more likely. But then, a "formalizing" act towards some "organization" was needed again. The public money which the Tourist Office had promised to give couldn't just go to a private circle of friends. The "friends of Eranos" had to assume a public, legally appropriate status. Therefore, at a meeting that took place on October 31st, 1989 at the Hotel Tamaro in Ascona, the "Associazione Amici di Eranos" was founded. Under the professional guidance of Vacchini, statutes for the association were adopted and a provisional steering committee was elected. A new cycle of *Eranos Tagungen* could now be launched.

On the eve of August 19th, 1990, in the court of the Casa Serodine at Ascona, the first *Tagung* in this new cycle was inaugurated, in quite a festive mood. Its theme, "Resurrection and Immortality", was felt to have a self-referential second meaning. Befittingly, the Casa Serodine had just been restored to its architectural splendour. Altogether, two hundred persons attended the *Tagung*. The "Amici di Eranos" – in July 1990 their association already had 86 members – were well on their way to be the new carrier of the *Eranos Tagungen* at Ascona. Their intention of course was not only to have them continued but to renew and reshape them. To that purpose, a number of decisions and measures were taken:

(1) The *Tagungen* shall resolutely be steered towards an emergence indeed of an *Eranos*, that is the "event"; all "organization" – and there was no "event" without an "organization" – should serve this objective.

(2) The greatest care will be taken to put together for every *Tagung* a college of first-rate scholars who, besides, are gifted with an inspired and inspiring mind. The former group of speakers will be rejuvenated and its scope will be widened, with regard to the range of disciplines and its cultural and geographical diversity. Each year the college will include female scholars. To keep the college of speakers as open and vital as possible, speakers will be re-invited only after an interval of at least one year.

(3) To the three languages in which traditionally lectures had been offered - German, French, English – there will now be added Italian as the fourth language for Eranos lectures.

(4) While at the old cycle spatial barriers and a hierarchical structure separated "speakers" and "audience" from each other, the Eranos community of the new cycle is meant to include "speakers" and "audience" alike.

(5) Sessions of discussion and debate, accessible to everyone, will be provided – these were not part of the program of the old cycle.

From 1990 onwards the "Amici di Eranos" kept to the course defined by these decisions and measures taken in 1989 and 1990, with the *Tagungen* which were held in Ascona under their auspices at the Casa Serodine (1990), the Collegio Papio (in 1991 and 1992), the Monte Verità (from 1993 to 2000), the Collegio Papio again (from 2003 to 2006), in Pisa at the Villa di Corliano (2012), in Romania at Târgu-Neamț (2013), and that are partially documented by the series of Eranos books - the *Reihe Eranos* - , as well as by the website www.ERANOS.org, press reports, and a number of scholarly publications.

There is now and always a need for organizational and material conditions which will shelter the imagined event from which an *Eranos* starts. Such conditions do not depend on a spatial location. The essential requirement, however, is this (and that's why it's rather exceptional to gain the conditions for an *Eranos*): That the event can emerge unobstructed.

(This is an abbreviated text. For the full text, including notes, see: **Tilo Schabert, "From Olga Froebe-Kapteyn to the Amici di Eranos. On the history of the Eranos-Tagungen at Ascona", in: Matthias Riedl, Tilo Schabert (Hrsg.), Die Stadt, Achse und Zentrum der Welt – They City, Axis and Centre of the World, Eranos Reihe, Neue Folge, Bd. 16, Würzburg 2011.**)

