

Oral History: Eero Vuorio / 2019/7/19

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File name: 2019_07_19_EeroVuorio_transcript**Key**

AFL: = Interviewer, Anne-Flore Laloë

EV: = Participant, Eero Vuorio

[??? at XX:XX] = inaudible word or section at this time

AFL: So we're here today, it's the 19th of July 2019, we're at EMBL Heidelberg in Germany, and this interview is part of the oral histories programme of the EMBL Archive. My name is Anne-Flore Laloë and I'm the archivist at the EMBL. And so please could you introduce yourself?

EV: OK. My name is Eero Vuorio. I have also a fairly long history with EMBL, I was nominated as a Council delegate I believe it was 1999 or 2000 and then I was actually serving as a chair of the EMBL Council for four years, and another term of three years afterwards – they decided that the rules can be interpreted in a way. And I have also been involved in many of the SAC meetings, many of the evaluations of the outstations and the programmes and in more recent times I have also had some, should I say, special duties with EMBL writing reports on designated, essentially or invited by the Director General or the chair of Council. So I have a complex history but it's all kind of on the administrative side.

AFL: OK. So before we delve into your complex EMBL history, can you just tell us what your background is?

EV: OK. I am an MD and a PhD. I got my MD 1974 at the University of Turku in Finland. I've never seen a sick patient in my life which is the best for both parties, so I became a basic scientist. I was nominated a Professor of Molecular Biology at the University of Turku where I spent a fairly long research career. I also did my postdoctoral training at the University of Chicago, which is a great school, and worked a little bit as a visiting professor at ETH Zürich, another great place, and then spent two years as a visiting scientist at MD Anderson Cancer Centre in Houston, Texas. So I spent about four years of my research career abroad, otherwise in Finland. Little by little in Finland I was involved increasingly in medical, or should I say research administration, I became the chair of the Medical Research Council of Finland for full six year verdict and also chair of the ethics board. And in the end in my university I was the chancellor of the university, you know the guy with the black suit and the white shirt and tie. I actually then left the University of Turku and became the Director of Nationwide Research Infrastructure stationed at the University of Helsinki for the past five years of my career. I'm 71

years old now so I've been retired for over three years, but I still keep working on foundation boards, particularly in Denmark who don't care about age as such at all. So it's a research career that became increasingly administrative as often times happens.

AFL: And so you said you're an MD but what was your subject as a researcher?

EV: My basic research has always focussed on connective tissue. I got involved in very early stages in the molecular cloning of RNA molecules and DNA molecules and sequencing them, but I was using these new techniques, also the transgenic models, which I mainly used in Houston and brought back to Finland, as models of human connective tissue diseases, cartilage diseases like osteoarthritis and bone diseases like osteoporosis. So it was basic research with always a twist towards the clinical side, so we have done a lot of research, fairly well-known research with orthopaedic surgeons and ophthalmologists as well – eye is actually pretty much like cartilage. So I have to say that I was quite happy with my research career but the problem was that when you start doing 50 or 60% administration you cannot remain competitive very long. So I kind of gave up about ten years ago by ... I simply brought all the PhD projects that I had to an end and then decided that OK this is enough for research. Now I am just being used as an expert in all kinds of organisations. <5:00>

AFL: Excellent. And so when's the first time you came across EMBL?

EV: I actually gave the EMBL... or let's say my first contact probably was more with EMBO, of course, it was a meeting that was organised in the 1970s, I think it was 1979, this building was not really in place yet. There was a meeting organised in *Hirschhorn*, which is up the *Neckar* River. A fair amount of time passed before I actually came back to Heidelberg, I knew many of the people here, Kai Simons is a friend and Henrik Garoff and Ari Helenius, Matti Saraste, they were all at least well-known to me, like I claim, we were friends. So I didn't interact to much before I became the chair of the Medical Research Council because the chair typically was the person who was nominated by the Finnish government as the scientific delegate to the EMBL Council. But there was a time before that when Finland used EMBO and EMBL services a lot because we performed a nationwide review or evaluation of molecular biology in Finland. This was where people like Lennart Philipson and Fotis Kafatos and a lot of the leadership of both organisations to Finland, so there was a lot of interactions already at that point. Then I was the target of course of their visit, since then I have been more involved in the governance of EMBL and of course I have also been the EMBC at the same time as EMBO so I know... EMBL, so I know both organisations reasonably well.

AFL: Excellent. So this was your first time in Heidelberg so in the late seventies –

EV: Late seventies.

AFL: - and then the relationship solidified through the eighties?

EV: Well, yeah in a sense, yes. I was fully aware of EMBL people from the same laboratory where I worked, came here to do a postdoc and I knew people here. I think it was in 1999 when I came to Heidelberg for a visit which was somehow related to me being the chair of the Council, and at that point I believe actually we agreed with Fotis Kafatos that I could be kind of proposed as the Finnish delegate. And I think already at that point they had some kind of a masterplan that I would probably also help with the chairmanship of the Council, because when I came I was not more than a year here when they made me the vice chair. This was, well, this was time with Peter Gruss who was very big boss already because he became the president of Max Planck at that point so he never spent the whole time in Council so I had to chair part of the Council as a very novice person.

AFL: OK. So what does the Chair of Council do?

EV: <Chuckles> I think the important aspect obviously is that the Council is an extremely important organisation for EMBL because that's where the Director General gets all his or her money. The Council delegates are all sent by their own ministries with rather different ways, their nomination is different and some of them represent funding organisations, some of them are really just independent scientists and so on. But in the end the most important issue obviously is that the Council decides on the budget, how much money can they provide for EMBL in the next five/six year indicative scheme, which then translates into an annual budget. The Chair of the Council is the moderator of these discussions, of course the Director General is there to make proposals and the administrative director, but the Chair of Council has to translate these discussions into something that becomes a resolution. <10:00> And it may be somewhat symbolic that most of the chairs of EMBL Council have come from rather insignificant, small scientific countries. Finland has been represented at least on three occasions, Greece, Portugal or then some very strong scientist from Germany or a big country. I don't recall the chairs before... well, only two chairs before my time, but both are Peter Gruss and Patrick Cramer, of course are very strong German scientists whose power is in the fact that they are *highly* respected. The other ones, you know, a small country is always better to propose a compromise because we are no danger to anyone, we pay 1.4% of the budget, Germany pays 25 or something like, depends of course. you know the formula.

I think for the chair to essentially perform his duties properly, and maybe I took this far too seriously, but it indicates that I kind of liked it, the chair is invited to participate in all of the SAC meetings in every spring, it's almost one week here in Heidelberg, which includes always an evaluation of one of the programmes. And I was also invited to participate in the evaluations of the outstations, so during the altogether seven years of my chairmanship, I really kind of dived very deep into this laboratory and I understand how research is done because I was also possible... it was accepted that I was also present in the confidential discussions of the SAC. So I know more than the Director General some of the discussions. But that was of course just to make absolutely sure that the SAC is doing what the Council has invited them to do, seriously discuss even matters which are complicated and maybe sensitive.

And then little by little of course became big issues, Fotis Kafatos retired, it's natural that the Chair of Council becomes the Chair of the Selection or Research Committee. And now there all of a sudden I was sitting chairing a committee of was it six or eight? I think maybe eight members who were just discussing how to find a suitable candidate. And that was the time when I noted that there is no written record whatsoever of how it was done the previous time when Fotis Kafatos was... so I got some names of retired professors, I'm not exactly sure if I remember the names so I will get them to you later if you want to. And I essentially then wrote a procedure of how this was done. I think it's a seven or eight page document which has been cited quite a few times because future chairs have desperately been trying to read it, not to follow it exactly the same way, because times are changing. In the early days... I mean this was a big thing, I spent probably 30% of my time for half a year on the selection process of the... you know, because people like Paul Nurse, who was on the committee, Janni Nüsslein-Volhard, important scientists from all over the world who were simply going through lists of names and thinking of their personal capabilities and their scientific standing and every imaginable aspect of their, should I say, known behaviour and capacity to work under pressure and so on. That was extremely time consuming, but then again, the end result, we got Iain Mattaj, which was of course, well something that can be discussed. The first time that EMBL got a Director General who was an in-house candidate which obviously received some criticism, but then again... <15:00> well, there are stories maybe I can tell you at some later time how the other candidates... 'cause you know, how do you approach a candidate who does not know that he is a candidate? So the chair of the committee, that's poor me, calls him or sends an email and says, 'I would like to have a 15 minute discussion with you on the phone about...' so you approach them and say that, 'Your name has been brought up as a very excellent candidate to become the new Director General of EMBL. Would you think that you would be able to consider this?' And the first reaction is, 'No, no, there must be a mistake, under no circumstances my name must not appear on any list whatsoever. I am not available under any circumstances and make sure that my current employer does not know about anything like this.' Then we discuss and they say that, 'Oh, this is very flattering and it sounds exciting', and so on. And always the end result was, 'And of course keep in mind that if no other candidates can be found, you can always give me a call.' Which essentially means that they were much interested but they don't want to be known listed on a shortlist of three people, for instance. This type of procedure doesn't function for that. Now, I think I understood last time when Edith was selected that they, based on the demands of some member state delegations, they actually also advertised the position so you would nominate yourself or essentially write an application to be listed as a potential candidate. I was not involved except that I had to answer a few phone calls just telling how things were done last time, but I was not involved at all, and I really don't know exactly how but there are people who will tell you.

AFL: Yeah. So between the point of Fotis Kafatos saying that he was going to leave or retiring and –

EV: I think he's essentially reached retirement age, but anyway, I do not recall... but it did not come as a surprise, it was a very kind of clearly defined and scheduled project.

AFL: And how long did it take until Iain was eventually appointed?

EV: Well, I think the process of the search committee, it took about a year. I think this was an interesting challenge also for confidentiality because I was advised and I behaved like I was supposed to, that when the search committee or the selection committee had clearly decided that our number one candidate is Iain Mattaj, who obviously also was the only candidate who had openly said that he would be available. He had no difficulties. I mean this was fairly well known and of course this made the search committee's work, on one hand, much easier because we had a fantastically good candidate who had already announced his availability. So essentially you were kind of checking every other candidate's merit against his. This discussion within the search committee was quite easy I would say in the end, despite the fact that we had a lot of also excellent candidates. But then it was decided that the Chair of the Committee would also check with the outstations, in fact they decided that I would meet all senior scientists from the EMBL system, confidentially, and discuss with them the name of the new candidate and ask them to keep it confidential. And I honestly think that when then the whole thing was decided in Rome on St Peter's and St Paul's Day, the EMBL Council meeting, it was a surprise to almost everybody. So confidentiality, I think, was maintained at a level where the whole Europe did not know yet who the new Director General would be. <20:00> But that of course also meant that I travelled to at least Hamburg and Hinxton, I think I met the Monterotondo people somewhere else. But anyway, so this consultation, I think it gave very strong approval of the proposal.

AFL: That's very good.

EV: Of course there were some critical comments as well, I mean... scientists are like that. So from the work that we started it took, I think about one year, I have of course the dates but this is close enough.

AFL: So you mentioned a couple of criticisms, you mentioned in particular the criticism that Iain Mattaj was of course an internal candidate.

EV: Yes.

AFL: Can you tell me a bit more about that, what were people unhappy about?

EV: Well, I think ... maybe two things, some of the senior scientists who were not overly ... enthusiastic maybe would be the word, were thinking that they more or less know what the Iain Mattaj way of governance is. Towards the end of Fotis Kafatos' years I believe Fotis was extremely good at the kind of foreign policy of EMBL; he was a mastermind in discussing with member state ministries and so on. And Iain Mattaj was increasingly actually running the scientific part of the laboratory in his way, which obviously has been extremely successful, but so people knew kind of what to expect. Whereas for the kind of scientific renewal of EMBL, which is one of the drivers of the institution, made people felt that it would have been better to get an outside candidate to bring in some new ideas that

hadn't been around for quite some while. So I think it's very typical but what I can say is that there was overall very strong support for Iain Mattaj's nomination, but this obviously, again you have to realise that also I'm a, in my opinion, a pretty easy going and nice guy, people say to me different things than they would say to a colleague because they respect me as a powerful person, even though I'm not really using my powers. So I don't think we can make any big issue about this but it was quite clear that also in the Council there was discussion about why does the Council only get one candidate to select from? And I think this time also Council wanted to have more individuals to select from, but a Council of 25 delegations cannot perform an interview, cannot perform a meaningful selection process the same way as eight great scientists who are much more involved in the... so I mean I think this is how... this type of selection will always have to be conducted, that you cannot give this to a Council only for Council to decide on the name that they have. They nominate the people who do the work and then they approve their... that's it.

AFL: That sounds like a reasonable way forward.

EV: I think this is how international organisations simply do this. These are such high level positions that you cannot be, you know, at the age of 50/55 to be in an open competition when you are actually a president of a university or a major scientist in one organisation or another, that's sending a very bad signal at home.

AFL: So these procedures you said you've delved very deeply into EMBL.

EV: Yeah.

AFL: Can I ask what would you change about EMBL if you could, having been so intimate with the lab? <25:00>

EV: Well, I think what's probably first important to say is that I very highly respect this institution. I have been treated here extremely friendly, I think I have been given more attention even to my smallest little expectations and demands, I hardly ever have demands but they just kind of offer me all kinds of help. So I have always felt very positive when I come to Heidelberg and to EMBL, even if I know that the work that I have to do is sometimes quite demanding and I'm honestly a humble little country boy. I sometimes feel that, 'Oh my god, isn't there somebody who's more capable of doing this thing?' And then I'll try to do it the best I can and often times get rather positive feedback, so I guess the answer is that that was good enough.

I think scientifically this laboratory is doing great, has been doing great all the time. As it has grown not only in size but also in age, for instance, it has always... and the society around has changed, you know social benefits are becoming more important for young scientists, the kindergarten, healthcare and retirement plans. They somehow came out <chuckles> to the Council from out of the room, people had not given much attention to the fact that we actually have to worry about what happens and how do we pay the retirement plans of the individuals who have been

working here. So in that respect I would say that while science has been at the forefront in the world, the kind of administration has been <chuckles> rather slow to respond. Maybe it's because it's so much science-driven organisation. So some of the procedures, you may know that I was a chair of one of these boards that actually is now something where we have to be very careful about the confidentiality. It's known that I was a chair of a board investigating, at the request of a Director General, the previous one, to terminate the contract of a scientist. And again, I was diving into the rules and regulations of EMBL and I think that's where they need an update, they need clarifications and many of them seem to have been actually approved 20 or so years ago and revisiting them, not with haste, but rather up on the consult or after consultation of number of people who have had to deal with them would be extremely useful. So this would be what I would say.

AFL: So EMBL catching up as a social... the social aspects of the lab, the societal I suppose.

EV: Yeah, societal aspects. I mean social aspects, you go to the canteen and you see that, again, this is functioning as the melting pot of Europe, it's the United States of Europe <chuckles> when it comes to young scientists. I mean this is the fantastic place to see all these people mixing, using broken English as their most common way of communicating. So it's a great melting pot. But then somehow... I mean unfortunately science is becoming increasingly bureaucratic, it comes from the funding agencies, you know these issues about timesheets and so on. I was also involved in one of the timesheet issues but that's maybe later. So I think this is where some work is needed.

AFL: OK, that's a very interesting perspective.

EV: The challenges of course are also somewhat related to the expectations of member states. I mean during my time actually the Spanish outstation, or I think they are called sites nowadays.<30:00>

AFL: Sites, we call them sites.

EV: But we still call them outstations, we old-timers and it seems to be sticking very closely also. So anyway, the Spanish site was opened and then as kind of a compromise already much earlier discussion about partnership laboratories came up. I think the Norwegian Sars, the marine biology was the first one which existed already about the time when I started as the chair, but then came the Nordic Partnership where actually four member states. There is no EMBL money flow into the partnership laboratories but it seems to make governments much more relaxed about where money is going because they feel that there is a direct link which guarantees that all good things also flow from Heidelberg to the partnership laboratories, even though they would not be needed for that particular case, but it brings a community. But if you're thinking about the newer member states, particularly Eastern European member states, I think there is a lot of pressure to kind of expand, maybe come up with some kind of a new tool or maybe using the

partnership here as well. So there is kind of, should I say, political pressure to maybe be alert regarding the EMBL structure of units and partnerships together with the headquarters.

AFL: Yes, and I guess in a way demonstrate the added value of membership and these sorts of...

EV: <Chuckles> I will be discussing this afternoon with the EMBL alumni event, I don't know if you are participating it?

AFL: Yeah.

EV: But every member state obviously, every ministry expects to get a fair return of all the money they put into EMBL and a little bit more, and we all know that <chuckles> that's not doable per se. My argument is exactly the opposite, no matter how many people you have employed here, are on the PhD programme or are postdocs, the network that you build, the access to the different services, infrastructure you have, creates added value which is much more than actually having a person working here for her or his PhD. So it is a win-win situation often times.

AFL: Yeah, that's a great way of looking at it I think.

EV: No, I honestly feel it. I mean of course EMBL likes to hear something like that because that's what they think, but I have been involved in so many different countries in setting up national structures or evaluating structures and often times we come up, 'Well, how should we do this? How would EMBL do it?' And so the EMBL model is kind of transferred to more and more countries; doctoral training in Finland was all organised based on the EMBL model basically. So it's actually not having to reinvent the wheel, and so how do you value this benefit?

AFL: Yeah, you can't monetise that.

EV: Yeah, there is no price tag involved as such, but if you enter, first of all, a structure which has been tested, which seems to be functional and secondly it has also the very important way of essentially harmonising the European PhD system for instance, you know PhD is many, many different things as I'm sure that you are aware. So I think EMBL has actually spend quite a lot of... I mean they have not spent time but they have served as a model which has helped to harmonise European systems.

AFL: That's very interesting. That's great. I think we're going to start wrapping up so I just want to ask you one last question, which I tend to ask everyone I interview. Do you have a piece of advice for young scientists starting out today, whoever they are?

EV: Well, funnily enough two very concrete examples, one is my younger daughter who actually is an MD PhD as well and she's just leaving in a month's time for Vancouver Canada to do her postdoctoral training. <35:00>

I'm involved because her husband is also working and they have three boys and I'm actually moving to Canada for a month to be the au pair grandfather. So in North America the childcare, I mean they are school going kids but they need transportation and maybe help with language, so I will be the social help there for a month. But I was approached only maybe a month or so ago by a young lady who got her Master's degree in Finland and she was looking for a place where she would be able to get a PhD, a good PhD with clear wishes to go into applied research. So I was a good boy and I went to the office of... what's her name now? The PhD programme.

AFL: Monika Lachner.

EV: Lachner, yes Monika's office and I chatted with her for about 15 minutes and now I will take the message to this lady in Finland and try to recruit. I personally think that science is a great profession for many people and international mobility is the secret of everything. People are competing with each other, we have to look at young people's CVs, you have to have a few places where you have worked and performed which have a reputation that you don't have to go and look in the statistics. EMBL is one of those. ETH that I mentioned is one of them and good enough are also University of Chicago and the Ivy League schools which are still in the top ten of all universities. I never have to explain what I did in Chicago. And for that matter in medicine of course, the Cancer Centre, MD Anderson, is ranked the number one Cancer Centre in the world. So having this as a background, it makes you... it's easy to explain what you've been doing and I encourage people to move around, get out of their comfort zone. I work a lot in Denmark and maybe I just mentioned this, Danish have a big problem that it's almost impossible to make their young PhDs or in Masters to go abroad, the reason is that they have a very nice social benefit system. The PhD students already get a salary, vacations and all these things, a reasonable salary by any European standards; they have excellent childcare facilities and at that background they actually get married or at least start reproducing rather early by European standards. Life there is so good that people don't want to move. Really you have to go out of your comfort zone and I think there are indeed countries like this. I mean France has also very secure job description... Are you French, but your name suggests?

AFL: Yes, I am.

EV: So I realise that this is a little bit of... it kind of increases the threshold of leaving the country because nobody can really provide you with similar benefits. I really think that people who have a future in science will step out of their comfort zone and do something really brave, and of course EMBL is perfect for that because here you take the risks. There is a lot of very crazy ideas that often times actually become very sensible. So it's a good starting point but this is not the only one.

Finally, I as a mentor always, I trained almost 30 PhDs, many of them MD PhDs, encourage people to go abroad for a postdoc – a bit more than 50% of my students have gone. Some decided they want to become real people doctors and they have become professors of dermatology and orthopaedic surgery and god knows what, and that's perfectly fine, I mean having a basic science PhD even when you become an eye doctor is not a bad combination. You understand?

AFL: Yeah.

EV: But I encourage them and it is the PIs responsibility to make recommendations <40:00> to a laboratory where you think this personality should fit, or maybe give three possibilities and invite them to visit. And typically a PI should be good enough so that when you go there and say that, 'I come from here and there', you say, 'Well, who's lab do you come from?' and they mention it, 'OK', that is the sign of guarantee that... never make a mistake of recommending a bad person to a great place because you ruin your reputation. But it is our responsibility to encourage people who have talent and excite them and also make sure that their life is not miserable so help them a bit financially and particularly kind of mentally.

AFL: As individuals?

EV: As individuals, yes.

AFL: I think those are great closing words. Thank you so much for your time today, it's been very interesting.

EV: OK, I hope this was useful.

End of interview