

Interview Eng. José Roberto Costa de Lacerda

(ex-Director Region 9) by Juan Carlos Miguez

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Question - You were Regional Director in 1974 and 1975.

That is right, Director for Region 9 in 1974 and 1975.

Q Why did you run for Director and who were the other candidates ?

I joined the IEEE in 1963 and had an intense involvement with it since the formation of S.Paulo Section in 1966, as co-founder, becoming Secretary, Treasurer, twice Chairman of the Section, Chairman of the Brasil Council, IEEE Electrolatina local Editor, etc.

I do believe the IEEE contributes a lot to our professional and mainly to our personal development such as involvement with high level management techniques, development of skills to approach any level of professional you are supposed to deal with, practice of English and Spanish, knowledge of present and past different cultures, organization of events, involvement with sectors of our electrical engineering we are not specifically living with, in our day-to-day work, enhancing the synergy of thoughts and actions .

With me ran for election Hector Ayllon, Section Chairman in Peru, an excellent engineer and devoted volunteer. Later on, in my tenure as Regional Director, I devised a way of having his talent contributing to the Region, creating the Region 9 Areas, subdivision of the Region, to keep a closer contact and more frequent visitation to the various territories covered; Ayllon was invited to help with the West Area, namely: Ecuador, Bolivia and Peru. Other Area coordinators were Paco Hawley, Ernesto Obregon -who was past Director, Americo Sampaio who was an excellent Professional, y Guillermo Andrews, first Director of the Region. However it was not possible to split my travel budget to non Directors and they had no allowance to travel, so the main idea of closer contact could not be accomplished. Later, Hector moved to the States as a high Officer of the World Bank, with great success.

Comment -Telephone conversations were then very expensive too.

Q - Which is the most important thing you remember about your First Meeting in the USA? Had you previously been to the US for another IEEE Meeting?

I remember John Guarrera -IEEE President in 1974, who was an excellent person and gave us total support; anything we wanted to do, he was ready to help.

Same for A. Stern, RAB VP, Donald Fink also was an excellent help, Kohli from India, we had an agreement of mutual support; Dillard, the Treasurer gave me also total support; Robert Tanner, a canadian, . . .

Since 1967, I frequently traveled to the US. Lohmann, when he was Reg. Director, decided to have the Reg. Meetings right before the INTERCON to propitiate our presence in it, by stretching the travel little bit, for the same cost (airfares were based on distance, and there was flexibility in stopovers).

However the first Board Meeting is something unforgettable- Being received and heard, with due respect, by the Snr. Head of the GE R&D Labs, Snr. Research Head of Westinghouse Co., Director of Hewlett-Packard, President of Magnavox (Philips in the US), Dean of Universities

in the US and high rank Directors at NASA, that was a stimulus for me to keep up with it. Remembering that still moves me, it was very emotive for me.

Q - Any anecdotes or comments worth mentioning about the trips you made as Regional Director?

I believe we cannot do everything we think should be done during the term; there is no sufficient time or resources for it, so we better foccus on some aspects to enhance and succeed. Mine were **Growth of the Region** and **Inter-Relation** between peers. I was born in S.Paulo, Brasil; the people born in this State is nicknamed “Bandeirantes” after the Pioneers that carrying a banner (“bandeira”) entered the Country conquering regions...hence, growth of the Region was my inspiration and a 40% raise was our result in Region 9. On the other hand I believed – and still believe - there are so many talents in the Region that could thrive better, were they known by their peers, regardless of frontiers. So, I made a point of visiting at least 2 countries on my way to and from the Board Meetings; usually a prosper Section and a weak or non existing prospect section. Among those I visited Bolivia, Ecuador, Honduras, Jamaica, Bermuda (Yes, by mistake, Bermuda ended up inside Region 9), etc.

In one of those occasions I was supposed to open the Central American Conference with the President of Nicaragua, flying on the eve of the inauguration. When I reported at 10PM to the Pan Am check-in counter I learnt Nicaragua had changed rules and I needed a visa to enter the Country, even though being- so to speak- an invitee of the Government. Well that flight I lost. The alternative was to go to S.Salvador, catch a car and drive onto Manágua; there was an early flight to Salvador, via Panamá. So I went to the Nicaraguan Consulate to wake up the Consul, very early in the morning, but nothing could be accomplished because the rubber stamps were inside a drawer locked by the clerk which could not be found in time. Well, I eventually sent a note from San Salvador excusing my absence. But I am sure I was not too popular in the Consulate in S.Paulo after all that !

Q - The Regional Meeting 1974 was in Santiago, february 28 to march 1; in 1975 it was in Caracas, april 2 to 4. Any comment or special circunstances on the site selection, the local volunTERS, problems, anecdotes, etc ?

There was a serious problem with our Chilean Section: during the political bad situation they went through; it was forbidden to export dollars, in other words, the members could not pay their dues. Then I devised a way of the IEEE being paid: with the agreement of my friends in the Board of Directors (they soon became used to our indirect ways of accomplishing things honestly, the “jeitinho brasileiro”) we authorized the Chilean Section Chairman Rudolf Rhim to receive dues against receipts, exchange them for dollars at the daily rate and keep them in cash; then we had the Regional Meeting there and paid a good deal of the expenses, including refunds of airfare, with that money. Bingo! The account was zeroed !

C I have heard about this story, but I didn't know when, nor who were involved.

It was fun! There was curfew (“Toque de Queda”) established in the Country at that time; we had to finish our meetings and dinner soon enough for the servants, waiters, etc to reach home before the time limit - around 11PM, if I remember correctly - and our people went back to the hotel guarded by motorcycles and sirens. Eduardo Bonzi Correa, Coordinator of the Student Branches in my term, was related to Officials of the Army and Air Forces, so we were well protected. Charles Stewart Jr., the Executive Board rep. was terrified at the beginning but

then understood the situation and enjoyed the experience. I bet he told up to his grandsons that story he participated.

Q And what about the Regional Meeting in Caracas?

It was normal practice for the Section of the Country hosting the Regional Meeting – always an honour – to involve electrical companies which offered a dinner, technical visits, souvenirs, price reduction in hotels, conference rooms, secretary help, etc. Right before our established Meeting in Caracas, I don't remember what happened that the Section Officers changed and we could not get in contact with them. Everything ready on our side and absolute silence from Venezuela. We ended up having to arrange everything from outside the Country. We proceeded with our Meeting in Caracas, with Venezuela Section absent. Fortunately, later the Section eventually returned strong and restored its good representation in the IEEE.

A delegation came during our Meeting “ we came to claim” we are here from Venezuela, we ought to remain in the Meeting !

No you have no right to enter this Meeting; we are in Caracas but this is my room, and you are not invited to enter. I'm the Regional Director, this is my card, this is the address to send any claims you may have. BYE BYE !

They were not any Officers, they had not been elected, they had neither answered not helped at all and they came to claim!

C I must say your regional Meetings were quite interesting !

Q Who were your officers, direct collaborators ?

Sub-Director José Américo Sampaio, Secretary-Treasurer José Jardini

Q Any other volunteers whose activity was outstanding ?

Sampaio took the responsibility to manage the FIRST LATINCON in 1974 and did it with enormous success. Jardini helped a lot keeping the books and exchange rates during a very difficult time of high inflation. In relation to the Student Branches Coordination, Bonzi somehow raised the money in Chile, rented a bus and brought a group of students to LATINCON traveling about 4,000 km (nearly 3 days on the road) to and fro. We arranged free lodging for them at a Sport Stadium in town.

C IN 1990 I was Section Chair in Uruguay and we got money from HQ (Electroproject) to take 20 students to INGELECTRA in Chile, also by bus.

During LATINCON we invited also the IEEE Executive Meeting to seat here, with coverage by the technical and popular press, so all the participants and specially the students had the opportunity to meet the President John Guarrera, Vice President John D. Ryder and Arthur P. Stern elected President, among other Officers.

Q In 1974 a new Section was formed in Bahia (March), another one in Ecuador (August) and in Monterrey April 1975. You remember the volunteers involved? Any othe comment about those new IEEE Units ?

Traveling to Equador I looked for Prof. Lionel Plaza, a IEEE Member and after some

considerations convinced him of forming the Ecuador Section in 1975.

Same thing happened with Bahia (a state in Brasil). Eng. Carlos Faria Ribeiro, from COELBA the local Utility Co., invited a wonderful group to form the Section. Among them was Antonio Carlos Bastos, later a very well succeeded Reg. Director and Reg. VP, and a presently Brazilian Deputy José Carlos Aleluia. Well the Petition list was too short not reaching the minimum number to be approved.

During the BOD, I raised and said we had a “Catch 22” in hands: If we did not approve that Section it would never reach the minimum number needed. After an explosion of laugh, the Board approved “tentatively” the Bahia Section. Not only we surpassed the limit but we had one of the most active sections in Latin America inviting personalities directly and giving outstanding people to the Institute as Carlos Bastos, Clotilde Pimenta, etc.

After breaking the model of one Country-one Section, not practical in Countries of large size, Mexico applied for Monterrey and Peru for another (sub-)section. IEEE HQ wanted to have a single point of contact; we offered the Country Councils as a bureaucratic solution.

Q You told me a Section was formed in Bolivia; later dissolved and formed again?

That is correct. In one of my travels to Bolivia, I tried to contact engineers I knew were installing a satellite terminal there. Without Google or Internet, only bad international long distance calls and post office I had no results. So I decided to go, published on the local newspaper an invitation for the next day, in my hotel, for a paper on Telemetry I presented. Surprisingly a lot of engineers came up, enjoyed and signed a petition to form a section I had prepared in advance. We had the Bolivia Section approved and the Chairman (I forgot his name) came at least twice to the following Reg. Meetings. Their names could be found in the lists of representatives. Later the Communication Co. left the Country, the employees spread out and the Section became dormant, reviving later through another group.

C Yes, Bolivia was approved again in 1998; I was Director and I attended the Inauguration Meeting. I also had a bad time with the height of La Paz !

What do you remember about the IEEE, world-wide, when you were a Member of the IEEE Board of Directors ?

The most relevant, in my opinion were the BART cry, the resulting Ethic Rules, Piscataway and the dues reduction.

Engineers from Bart-Subway line in the S.Francisco Bay went public to denounce irregularities they thought could endanger future passengers. Bart fired them and the IEEE took position on their side, following the principle it is our duty as engineers to preserve the life and safety of people, to our knowledge, beyond the employment bounds. Also, knowledge acquired in a company is our personal asset; it cannot be transmitted to a competitor but it can be used to perform better, without revealing the secret. Subtle but effective. I still keep that original “IEEE Code of Ethics” I have it here now for you to see.

Moving from the building in the 47th St to Piscataway would reduce the costs. At that time they started to consider dues reduction for people not earning so much, being retired, etc

The creation of the IEEE-USA, separately dealing with problems only North Americans were

concerned, such as Income Tax Return, Retirement, Health Assistance in the US, etc. Harold Goldberg was coordinating the move. It was extremely embarrassing to vote for something we were not concerned, knowledgeable or affected, and it was also time consuming hindering other debates we were absolutely interested in.

Q Tell us about the region's publication “ELECTROLATINA” ?

Engineer Erik Wallsten, Swedish by birth, Mexican by choice and IEEE by heart was the champion, the secret of the IEEE Electrolatina, looking after printing, advertisements, delivery and all. At that time, mailing each number was extremely expensive, so he used to send the packages of magazines for the sections to be re- pack, re-address and mailed them locally to the members. Many of us had problems to solve at the Customs to accept those magazines “imported”, “competing” with local printers.

We devised the magazine with technical articles for the engineers, basic principles for the students, bulletin for the associated members, vehicle to announce IEEE events and advertisements between manufacturers and users. All the Associated Editors collected (should I say “extracted”?) articles from our countries and sent them to Erik for selection. As I said before, in an international meeting (Reg. Meeting) I offered my opinion the articles should be written both in Portuguese or Spanish, the language of the author, and so it went on.

Costs were high mainly because of mailing, taking one to three months for a magazine to reach destination. Mind you, DHL, Fed Express, etc. were non existing then... actually not even microcomputers existed !

At the beginning, the Region covered all the costs; later as advertisements came by the hands of Hawley, Lohmann, Quintino, etc. the Region took care only of the needed difference. It was difficult because branch offices of large companies did not have budget for advertisement in a magazine with relatively small distribution locally and didn't care about the distribution abroad (which they claimed to be responsibility of their HQ). Headquarters of companies preferred to publish in SPECTRUM with broader visibility.

And, eventually IEEE, with higher expenditures (Piscataway being installed, move from NYC 47th Street, etc.) IEEE decided not to subsidize it (through the Region) anymore.

Q How often did it appear? The last number was in 1975.

It was quarterly published: March, June, September, December.

In 1975 we tried to keep publication and succeeded only two numbers: March-June and the last one: September-December 1975, Vol. IX Nbr. 2. It was very sad for me to close our Magazine.

Q Were there any IEEE Conferences in the Region in those years ?

LATINCON , COPIMERA, MEXICON, that I recall.

Q Any other comments or issues you consider significant to add?

When Lohmann applied for Fellow, we learnt how difficult it was for a Latin American to compete with a North American for the title, the total number per year, limited to a percentage of the Senior Member's number.

The North Americans have much more opportunity with so many private and Government Labs, equipped with the state of the art of instruments and tools.

C and we in Latinamerica, by culture, are not used to write and publish papers

Exactly, this is perhaps the most important reason!

Then with devised a two fold idea:

Foster the application to the Senior Member status, for those members with possibilities, helping to raise the Fellowship opportunities and.

And let us create a title for the distinguished Latin American Engineer, the Sections had to present their Senior Member candidates to this distinguished title, filling up forms identical to the ones for Fellow (to familiarize them to the rules).

Bonzi came up with the Title of the **EMMINENT ENGINEER** of Region 9 and wrote the rules I presented to the Board. It was approved, but right after that it was forbidden to have regional titles, but our was already accepted.

Hawley passed away and we wanted to pay him homage for the Region creation. So I tried to establish a **Francisco Hawley Prize** for the section with larger growth. The winner would receive a coat of arms and a parchment with the IEEE symbol over the Latin American outlined in watermark back ground. It would carry the signatures of all the previous Reginal Directors at that date.

Reg. Director Ramiro Garcia – a good friend of Hawley – had the emblems made at his term in Office. Unfortunately we never agreed how to establish the winner (percentage or absolute number of growth). So the idea did not flourish at all.

Q When and why did you join the IEEE ?

During my Engineering Course I frequently came across references to the Institutes, Standards and Technical Publications. Being fluent in English, I decided to learn more about the Institute to access new knowledge. Through my School Director I approached the recently merged IEEE (Imagine, I had the first SPECTRUM ever published! Unfortunately, I lost it) and joined IEEE in 1963 as Member, later on in 68 applying for upgrade to Senior Member.

Q When, where and How did you came to work as an IEEE Volunteer ?

Right after Lohmann invited me to co-found the S.Paulo Section, early in 1966, he asked me to be Associated Editor for IEEE Electrolatina which would start shortly after. Mine was the idea of publishing the articles in the language of the authors to avoid difficulties of expressing thoughts in a different language. The reader has time to enquire or lookup a word in a dictionary; the author needs fluency to express his news and ideas.

Q The South Brazil Section (centered in Sao Paulo) was approved Nov. 1966. What do you remember about those times and your participation?

One Day, I was painting my living room, in my jeans, completely spotted with paint when a fellow rang the door bell. I recognized an old acquaintance from the Engineering School, perhaps one or two years ahead of me. It was the Manager at Siemens in Brasil, Carlos

Alberto Júlio Lohmann, member of the IEEE, as I was, inviting me to form the “São Paulo Section of the IEEE”. I signed the Petition on the spot.

Soon after, we received the visit of Francisco Hawley, from CONDUMEX, México, Chairman of Mexico Section and promoter of the new Region 9. Our São Paulo Section was formed and IEEE President Walter K. MacAdam delivered the charter during a luncheon at Light & Power Cave Generating Station. Light Co. always gave us full support, and later on this was crucial to maintain a constant audience for whatever paper presentation we arranged.

The first officers were: Pres. Carlos A.J. Lohmann, Luiz Quintino (Uruguayan by birth and the president of Westinghouse in Brasil), Augustin Woelz (still living in S.Jose dos Campos, S.Paulo State) and myself. Much later, during Sergio Fronterotta term, I guess, it was decided to merge the southern sections in Brasil, into the South Brasil Section.

When we had prohibition to send money abroad, we found out UNESCO Bonus which could be bought in the Country to pay for cultural endeavours. IEEE accepted them “as payment for the Spectrum subscription”.

When inflation was running high, it became too expensive to pay dues; we then started to find things an engineer needed in his day-to-day professional life, such as Xerox copies, hotels, food, etc. and started making agreements: “you make us a discount and we advertise your product in our mailing list and promotions”. It worked so well, a member could recuperate his annual fee in one year of discounts!

Q What is the most coveted recollection you keep from your life as an IEEE Volunteer?

Many times I was very much touched:

- At the end of the first LATINCON there was a party at my home where I had the honour of receiving all the people of the Board of Directors who came for the occasion. It was a remarkable evening, when President Guarrera granted, right there, the Chart of the Ecuador Section to the Chairman Lionel Plaza.
- Once, after a whole day of discussions on the IEEE problems at a Board Meeting, I thought people were not giving themselves the value they deserved, so, I asked permission to speak and made my point. After that, my peers stood up and applauded the message, to my surprise. Pres. Guarrera, rather joking, commented:”You son-of-a-gun ! I was never applauded in a Board Meeting” to which I returned: “You are in the right route being half latin; you needed to be a LatinAmerican, though!” With that I earned the opportunity of an invitation to become VP at the Board, which my work back home wouldn’t allow me to.
- Receiving the title of Emminent Engineer
- Receiving the Centennial Medal
- Receiving the Third Millennium Medal
- Receiving the Life Member status

Q Have you kept active as a Volunteer after your tenue as Regional Director?

Always in, sometimes more, sometimes less involved. Right now I am “paying” a promise made to Ed Bonzi who trusted me the formation of the Life Member’s Brazilian Group. We named it “Eduardo Bonzi Group of the Life Members of the IEEE in Brasil” - IEEE-EBG for short – and in 2 years we received the “Outstanding Prize” twice.

Q What would be your counsel to the young Electrical Engineering Professionals ?

Join the Group of the IEEE ! That is far more than applying for membership; it is joining the local Section, eventually your sector Chapter – or else forming one for that matter – and enjoying this 2 way road: you receive knowledge and you may contribute with your knowledge for the IEEE community all over the World.