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Professor Stig Strömholm Interviewed by Anne Buttimer

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Professor Stig Strömholm

Stig Fredrik Strömholm was born in Boden, Sweden in 1931. Educated in Law at the University of Uppsala, he achieved an LLB in 1957 and subsequently earned a diploma in comparative law at Cambridge University in 1958 as well as a LLD from the University of Munich in 1964, before returning to Uppsala to earn his LLD in Private Law at the University of Uppsala in 1966. He has described himself as a 'legal chameleon'. He has served in many functions, from Junior Lecturer to University Vice-Chancellor and Academy President. He has written on many subjects, and in many languages, mostly within the domains of intellectual property law and the history of legal ideas, but he has also made

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excursions into the fields of fiction and criticism. With such a rich background of international networking and administrative experience, he became an obvious choice of President of Academia Europaea 1997 to 2002.

Anne Buttimer (AB): Today it is our great privilege to meet Professor Stig Strömholm, former Vice-Chancellor of Uppsala University, past President of the Academia Europaea, for another Swedish interview on the 'founding visions' of the Academia Europaea. Thank you, Stig, for coming. First I'd like you to tell us where you come from, what your story has been.

Stig Strömholm (SS): Well, I never wrote a diary, so that means I do not remember very much of these 70+ years of my life. They have been relatively uneventful. I was born in 1931 in Boden, a small town in northern Sweden. My father was a senior army officer. He died when I was 2 years old, so I do not remember much of him. My mother took me and my older brother to Uppsala. So it really was there that we grew up. She planned for us to get on with our lives, which we did, and our only close relatives were living there. Among them was my uncle, my father's brother, who was to play a strong role in my life. He was Professor of Inorganic Chemistry in the University of Uppsala. I think that he was rather distinguished as a scholar and a researcher. He was born in 1871, came to Uppsala in 1888 and became part of the radical student movement there at the time. He was really the only adult we met. We lived a very still life. He was a bachelor and he joined us for Sunday dinner now and then. I went to Secondary School in Uppsala. There was an excellent school there, a very old one that was considered an elite school at the time. I passed my Secondary School examination in 1949, having specialised in Greek and Latin. I was very interested in the Classics. I wasn't yet 18, having skipped one form and then I was a little too young for military service, so I couldn't go with my friends to the Regiment in Uppsala. I took up studies at the University, passed my BA in 1952 in Scandinavian languages, Romance languages and literature.

AB: And not science, like your uncle?

SS: Certainly not, no. I wasn't particularly bad in science, but I had no real interest in it.

AB: And what about military service?

SS: Yes, in fact, I passed as Cadet No. 1 at the Royal Cadet School.

AB: Given your father's vocation in life, it would seem natural for you.

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SS: Yes, my family background had much to do with the military. I was a Reserve Officer with the Royal Armoured Corps. In fact my gas mask and other equipment of that kind was delivered to the King in the 1990s. So I have a flawless reputation for military service.

AB: And after that you went on to further study?

SS: Yes, in 1953 I took up law studies at Uppsala. And then I got a scholarship to Cambridge where I spent a year writing a small dissertation on international law and this I submitted in 1958. At that time in Sweden the classical career in law involved serving for a period – two and a half years or so – in the courts as a very junior judge. During the last six months of this period you could preside over the hearings. This I did, and then I went on to the Court of Appeal, being admitted to the bench at the lowest level. This is very much the same as in the French and German system. Once accepted as a future judge, then one of my teachers in the Faculty of Law suggested that I should do a doctoral degree in law – in private law – which I did. During this period of the four year course I got a Humboldt scholarship and spent a year in Munich (1962–63).

AB: You gained a lot from that experience?

SS: That was of enormous profit for me. You know I had looked forward to and enjoyed being in Cambridge, but it didn't feel quite the same with Germany. But I was very efficiently seduced by the Humboldt Stiftung and it was truly delightful. I got involved with the Max Planck Institute for Intellectual Property. The famous professor there at the time was Eugen Ulmer, one of the foremost twentieth-century experts on intellectual property.

AB: That is an extremely rich background: first classics and literature, then law and experience with the courts. And at quite an early phase of your career you had both a strong intellectual training and international experience as well?

SS: The international experience was particularly important at that time. Today everyone goes everywhere, but in the early 1960s only a few travelled. My mother sent me to France in 1947 – there was a rail connection then with sleeping coaches between Stockholm and Paris. So I was particularly favoured in that respect. I wrote my (Swedish) doctoral dissertation in law, and then, *en passant*, took a German doctoral degree in Munich because I was encouraged, and was treated so well and was surrounded with all kinds of support, at the Max Planck Institute. My Swedish doctoral

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dissertation (900 pages) was written in French. And then I was appointed as an Assistant Professor in Uppsala where I remained.

AB: This seems exceptional. It often happens that scholars who have had good foreign experience and have been successful and well received abroad, may not necessarily find themselves welcome back home when they return. You seem to have been welcomed back in Uppsala. Is that so? You seem to have managed to be accepted and applauded in fact, both internationally renowned and nationally accepted. You got many honours at home as well?

SS: To be a professor of law in those days meant a great deal of work. You had to do all the groundwork yourself. I was lecturing to undergraduates, examining them, and at the same time writing on the subject of intellectual property, history of ideas, philosophy. Then I was appointed a Full Professor in 1969 and remained there until 1973 when I was appointed Dean of my Faculty. This gave me some experience with administrative matters and with the kinds of work which you could normally avoid as a professor.

AB: Given your family background, it doesn't surprise me at all that you would strike people as being a potential leader.

SS: I don't know. I did not like sports, football and things.

AB: But I bet you could command the troops.

SS: Yes, I have the mouth… Anyway, once a Dean you are involved in university work and what happened to me was that I was elected Deputy Vice-Chancellor in 1978 and so I was part of the University Council, which at that time was comprised of the Vice-Chancellor and the Deans. If you had those qualities, skills in administration and university politics, you were observed. In my case, having served for 11 years in that capacity, I was elected Vice-Chancellor in 1989 and retired in 1997. In between I did military work which was required – 48 days per 3-years or so. I was attached to the staff of the officer responsible for the region of Central Sweden. I discovered a lot about the Russian ports in the Baltic.

AB: So you had to become a political geographer also in the field? At the same time you became involved in various research councils and other administrative responsibilities?

SS: That's part of the situation in a small country. I mean if you belong to the group of people who are prepared to give time and energy to the work of

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research councils, you tend to remain in that circle. There were the academies as well. I was President for 9 years of the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities, a body that corresponds basically with the British Academy, and a member of the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques in France. And that was a very pleasant experience and it brought me into contact with Academia Europaea.

AB: Yes, let's talk about the Academia. Did you go through the ESF, like most of the founder members?

SS: I did. Lord Flowers, or Sir Brian Flowers as he was then, and Professor Zweigert from Hamburg (now dead) asked me to come and lead a steering committee for a research project on medical responsibility and legislation. Heaven knows how they put that together, but we did. And I did that for some 5 years or so in the late 1970s.

AB: When the ESF was also in its early years?

SS: Yes, 1974 if I remember correctly. There was little experience in the field, but we had excellent administrators from various origins. I remember a very good English girl, a Victorian type, and a Norwegian who was impressive.

AB: The ESF was, in fact, a parent body of Academia, no?

SS: Yes, in a way, the original ideas were roughly similar. As President of the Swedish Royal Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities, which happens to be presently a relatively opulent body, I got into contact with the Academia Europaea, because, starting in 1988, David Magnusson, one of the founding fathers of Academia, was a member of this Swedish Academy. He asked for money from this rather affluent Swedish Academy and I'm glad to say that we gave it.

AB: That must have been welcome because in the early years the sources of funding for the Academia were few and far between.

SS: And funding remains a difficult question.

AB: So what were your perceptions of the 'founding vision' of Academia? You must have reflected on this, and presumably approved of it, when you accepted to become its President

SS: Yes, frequently people think that we reflect on things. That's not always the case – in many cases one has so much else to do! But I did feel vaguely

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that this is a good idea and it deserves support. But closer reflection on this matter was not a practice I indulged much in during those years. In fact, as early as 1997 I think, there was some discussion about my possibly taking over the chairmanship of the ESF – it was a Swedish colleague who had taken up this discussion – but then it was a little too early. And then suddenly came the invitation to come to London from Sir Brian Flowers and Lord Roberts and of course, Sir Arnold Burgen, whom I had met already in Uppsala at the AE meeting of 1993.

AB: It was at that meeting that I became a member.

SS: Yes, I remember. This was also the occasion when I got into contact with the AE people.

AB: There was great enthusiasm at that meeting.

SS: Yes, I remember it very vividly. But it was to some extent disappointing. People are not too punctual and too few came. That's a problem that the annual meetings have been labouring under all the time. In Uppsala, well, in Sweden, we may not be very charming in this country but we are punctual.

AB: But you did show a lot of graciousness at that meeting.

SS: Well we tried to do our best, but I remember the final banquet at Uppsala Castle for instance. When we have feasts there everything has to be very precise, punctual and the protocol is very clear. But I remember people just came, dropping in casually, informally dressed, sitting around…

AB: Yes, there are many anecdotes about that event. But you Swedes have a very special attitude toward time; you are very strict about appointments and schedules.

SS: That's right perhaps. But it has proved to be rather fruitful after all. It is one of the reasons for our efficiency. We are a rather poor country and people have to cooperate. I think that our best habits are due to the fact that there are nine millions of us spread over 450,000 square kilometres.

AB: I bet your Oxenstierna had something to do with that.

SS: Yes, he was an excellent school master for this country.

AB: And about Sweden, I have the feeling that attitudes in the Swedish university world are now far more oriented toward the English-speaking

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world rather than toward continental Europe. Now, at the birth of the Academia, there was strong Swedish support, pioneered by the ESF and by yourself and others who were involved with the Academia. But maybe that was showing a slight change of orientation?

SS: It was very different in different areas. Of course you are right. After the Second World War, French and German interests were supplanted by Anglo-American interests, which played a very big part in the entire intellectual development in this country. As for the Academia Europaea, I think that at the start it was an attempt to re-integrate Europe into a wider network of international co-operation. The greatest loss was in the humanities: because the loss of German and French, among the younger Swedish academics for 20 or 30 years now, is a catastrophe. Now they only pursue English and they speak good English.

AB: But the Academia has also become exclusively Anglophone: Is that not something of a contradiction?

SS: Well, Yes. In the Council – I was President between 1997 and 2002 – the feeling was that we had paddled along rather happily in English. It worked. The English are prepared to tolerate *pidgin*. I happened to be involved in some exercises where my French was put to some good use as a corresponding member of the Académie des Sciences Politiques et Morales. But the French people are not prepared to tolerate bad French to the extent that the English are prepared to tolerate bad English. And now they are paying the price for that. This is really hard to avoid. The key position, after all, is now Germany. And Germany is now virtually English-speaking. I mean the Marshall Aid, from the 1950s on, meant that the younger scientists are much less French-speaking. French academics are starting very much later in the day and now they are very much academically-oriented toward the English language journals…

AB: But educational systems – curricula, texts, examinations and credentials – in all countries are still very much framed in the vernacular languages. So what were the initial founding visions of the Academia, to filter down some ideas to the individual classroom? Is there not need for more flexibility on the question of language?

SS: Well, after all, the deepest elements are not those of nation, but parish, if you ask me. Parish concerns are locally rooted. You cannot expect people to express their feelings for anything beyond their farm – and there are not many doing that these days – or beyond the street where they lived as small children.

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AB: And people's views about nature around them, some expressions are not translatable also?

SS: Yes, as a matter of fact here in Uppsala, when I used to go as Vice-Chancellor to a science department, I always asked the young chaps who were preparing their dissertations: 'Are you able to explain to your aunt from the city of Åmå or Umeå what you are doing, in a language accessible to her'? And of course the answer was regularly 'no'. And, I remember when the German Federal President Rau visited Sweden, I was asked to organise a round table or talk in Uppsala. He would speak in German so that all the high guests could enjoy it fully. So I called the Humboldt Foundation in Bonn, which distributes awards, and said: Give me the names of the three or four first class Uppsala professors who have had Humboldt Awards in the last five years. They gave me the names and I called these colleagues and it turned out that none of them had spoken anything but English during their year of scholarship in Germany. Everyone spoke English. They had been to England, of course, and German was not a language that they had been in contact with. And this is, of course, the situation with Academia. Its identity is not suffering under some sort of Anglo or British domination, but the simple fact is that the *lingua franca* of European science now is English. And this gives colour to whatever you are doing. And, it must be added, that Britain has been very loyal in supporting the Academia Europaea, together with the Scandinavian countries, but without the Royal Society there would be no Academia Europaea.

AB: The Royal Society certainly took the initiative.

SS: Yes, they took the responsibility. But also the German Deutsche Forschungs Gemeinschaft and the Max Planck Society took their shares of the task. The Scandinavian countries, small and peripheral as they are, paid a rather small amount.

AB: I think the Scandinavian countries paid quite a bit more than their share of the overall contribution.

SS: I mean, Sweden did its best; Denmark and Norway too. As a member of the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques, I'm free to say that France was not unproblematic. As long as Hubert Curien was President there was support from France. But when Curien left the presidency – I succeeded him in 1997 – after that, it became very difficult to get support from France.

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AB: Europe is a culturally diverse continent. Yet the Academia Europaea is now committed to developing a unified European identity in scientific scholarship. Is that a realistic aim? Science should surely pursue universal aims? What was meant by that principle of a unique identity for European science?

SS: Well I think – I may be wrong because I do not belong to the founding fathers at all – my first years as President were, quite frankly, involved in a struggle about money. It was a question of survival. I remember, for instance, the third year, we wrote, with a very substantial dossier, to the 37 largest and most research-dependent European companies, for a subscription of some kind. We didn't get a penny: the response was completely negative. That was in 1998, a bad year. We registered all the responses, letter by letter. The British members knew: Sir Arnold had good friends in his country, and I had quite a few in fact; but it was very difficult at the time because of the defence strategies of companies founding their own little foundations for research. The response was rather hostile. So we really had to go around and negotiate with the various research councils and foundations in particular fields. That was what took most of my time. And I remember that we had a most efficient English Secretary, Mr. Colyer, who actually submitted a dissertation in Oxford afterwards, a very good man, and a very good writer in particular. But the fundamental question was 'Can we come around the corner?' These are my only reflections on the purpose, I'm sorry to say. But after a few years, thanks to some extremely generous donations from these countries, the next few years seem to be rather secure. I've started thinking, in a more constructive way, about what the Academia could do and should still remain. This is a completely independent body, expressing as well as it can, trying to pick up the best it can find among European scholars, and expressing their views on research about problems of common European concern. And it is doing this in a completely disinterested way. We should be, in a sense, the honest voice of European science and scholarship, speaking to politicians, with the normal independence of people who don't really have a stake in particular outcomes, within a limited context of national security: not advising them to 'do this' or 'do that'. Rather it should lay out the alternatives. The Academia has, after all, survived and it has a mission. It is precisely this. I don't think it should have ambitions about becoming an institution that launches or administers big research programmes. It should remain as the voice of independent scholarship and research.

AB: And the journal, *European Review*, for so many years edited by Sir Arnold, would this be the primary vehicle for communicating these ideas?

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SS: This is a splendid, fantastically reviewed, good journal.

AB: And it does really address general European issues. Especially during your time as President, I recall that there were excellent issues I recall on Europe-wide questions.

SS: It has always been good and it remains very good under the editorship of Theo D'Haen. But Sir Arnold, of course, was the pioneer.

AB: So, Stig, I think you have done more than most to promote the ideals that were there from the beginning. Sweden has helped financially and you have contributed your skills – intellectual and military – to the administrative leadership of a very worthy cause. Thank you so much for coming today.

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