In 1953 when I was a young staff member of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I was charged with the Specialized Agencies of the United Nations. Traditionally, all international contacts had to go through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Ministry wanted to remain the national centre to which all international contacts should be addressed but all technical questions had to be answered by the technical ministries. My job was to forward letters of the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) to the Ministry of Agriculture asking them what should be the reply and subsequently to send the reply to the FAO. Equally, I had to forward letters from the World Health Organization (WHO) to the Ministry of Health asking them how the Minister of Foreign Affairs should reply and subsequently forward that reply to the WHO. For all other specialized agencies the same rules applied. My task was to forward letters to the responsible ministries and be attentive that they were to replied within a reasonable time. Whenever political questions, such as the participation of the German Democratic Republic or the credentials of the Chinese delegation, were involved I had to pass that on to the political department of our ministry.

After some time I discovered that many of the specialized agencies were confronted with a number of similar problems. The question arose whether the executive board had to be composed of experts in the field or of governmental representatives. Long lists of arguments were presented for both views, but the argumentation differed from one organization to another. Similar differences could be found in other issues, such as the question whether non-self-governing territories could participate in the work of the organization, how the budget should be divided amongst the Member States, privileges and immunities of delegates and many procedural questions such as the order of voting on proposed amendments, questions of quorum and a possibility of secret voting. I had the impression that our Ministry of Agriculture did not know that particular questions of the FAO had already been discussed in WHO or UNESCO and vice versa. Here I saw a task for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and I started
extending my letters forwarding requests of international organizations to the technical ministries. I informed them about results of similar discussions in other organizations. After some time this gave me a reputation of being expert in the institutional questions of the specialized agencies of the UN and whenever a technical ministry prepared its proposal to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on how to reply to requests of a specialized agency they asked me to participate in their internal discussions about the preferred structure of the organization. This participation offered me further knowledge about the functioning of each organization.

As a young academic I still had to write my Ph.D. thesis and I decided to do so on a comparative study of the structure of the specialized agencies of the UN. The appetite came with the eating. So, after I had defended my thesis in 1957, I decided to write a more substantial book on the constitutional questions which face all international organizations. That book finally appeared in 1972. Ever since, I devoted a substantial amount of time to this branch of international law.

Five years after the defence of my thesis I was invited to become professor of the Law of International Organizations at the University of Amsterdam. This was a new chair next to the traditional chair of Public International Law. After Leiden University this was the second special chair for the Law of International Organizations. I decided to focus my inaugural lecture on the structure of the then existing international organizations, leaving the remaining field, that is the law coming out of international organizations, for later research.

First, I had to think of a name for this part of the Law of International Organizations. I considered “international constitutional law”, I rejected it, as constitutional law was a wider notion also including fundamental human rights. A second option was to reserve “constitutional law” for national constitutions and use “institutional law”, inspired by the institutions of the recently established European Communities, for the constitutions of international organizations. After some testing around with colleagues I finally decided to use the name International Institutional Law.

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