

A Diplomat with Plenty of Energy

Max Planck Society honors Reinhard Jahn with the Communitas Prize



Honored: President Martin Stratmann (left) presents Reinhard Jahn with the MPG's Communitas Prize. Professor Jahn is a Director at the Max Planck Institute for Biophysical Chemistry and a particular advocate of career support for junior scientists.

The Max Planck Society presented its Communitas Prize to Reinhard Jahn, a Director who consistently implements structural improvements in science, particularly in the area of support for junior scientists.

He is a man who gets things moving – calmly but doggedly, until changes are made. Just where the neurobiologist from the Max Planck Institute for Biophysical Chemistry in Göttingen finds the energy is a mystery to many. Reinhard Jahn is a man in perpetual motion, and one who has worked tirelessly for the Max Planck Society since 1997, as Max Planck President Martin Stratmann explained at the award ceremony before the Scientific Council. And he has done so with success and impact, connecting with people on an empathetic level, but without making a lot of noise.

When Professor Jahn left Yale to take up his appointment in Göttingen,

his attention was initially focused on the conditions at the new location: “There was little interaction with the neighboring university, and it was hard to attract good doctoral students,” he recalls. However, in his research partner at the university – Kurt von Figura, who later became president of the university – he found a counterpart who likewise wanted to clear away the barriers.

As a result, the establishment of two doctoral student programs, further assisted by Erwin Neher, evolved into the first International Max Planck Research School (IMPRS), which was launched in 2000. The IMPRS is now an award-winning model of structured graduate training from master's degree through to doctorate, as is the offshoot the Göttingen Graduate School for Neurosciences, Biophysics, and Molecular Biosciences (GGNB) co-developed by Reinhard Jahn. It is the embodiment of ex-

emplary and efficient cooperation between the Max Planck Society and the university, and played a major role in Göttingen's success in the 2012 Excellence Initiative. The GGNB currently involves four university faculties, three Max Planck Institutes and a Leibniz Institute, offering twelve doctoral student programs.

Since 2013, Reinhard Jahn has focused – initially at the request of President Stratmann's predecessor Peter Gruss – on improving conditions for junior scientists throughout the Max Planck Society. That sometimes takes effort, the 65-year-old admits – after all, old habits must first be broken to allow new ones to take their place. At the moment he is using the Max Planck Society's internal online platform maxNet to canvass opinions on new draft guidelines for the support and supervision of postdocs. As President Stratmann pointed out in his speech, this makes the Max Planck Society transparent and shows that everyone is taken seriously. In Reinhard Jahn's eyes, it is an exercise in democratic behavior.

He likes working with young people. “It is a privilege as one gets older,” he observes. As a doctoral student himself, he also experienced how easily scientific projects can fail. So career support for junior scientists is high on his list of priorities. He likes to be an instigator, listening and encouraging where necessary – his choice of words gives a hint of the philanthropist that colleagues see in him.

Does that explain where his energy comes from, considering that he also expends it in his involvement with the European Research Council and as initiator of the panel of experts at the German Research Foundation (DFG)? President Stratmann, at least, has found an answer: in presenting the Communitas Prize, he concluded his speech with the remark, “Some suspect that Professor Jahn's DFG water bottle with the telling label ‘Thirst for Knowledge’ actually contains a magic potion.”

Ten Starting Grants

The European Research Council (ERC) has awarded 291 Starting Grants valued at 429 million euros. In this second round of calls under Horizon 2020, the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, ten scientists – three women and seven men – at Max Planck Society institutes were successful with their applications and will receive funding.

Starting Grants are awarded annually by the ERC. Scientists who received their doctorates between two and around seven years previously are invited to take part in the competition provided that they intend to carry out their project at a European re-

search institute. Each grant is worth up to 1.5 million euros. In this round, the Max Planck Society was by far the most successful institution in Germany, well ahead of the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München with five grants and the Helmholtz Association institutes, which received two grants. The French research organization Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS) was the only institution in Europe to attract more funding, garnering twelve grants.

Of the 2,920 applications submitted this year, the physical sciences and engineering accounted for the greatest number, at 1,269, followed by life sciences at 940 and social sciences and the humanities at 711. Around 10 percent of the applications in each category were approved, with the ERC sending the glad tidings to 291 scientists from 38 countries. Of the successful applications, 28 percent were made by women, somewhat fewer than the year before (33 percent). Most grants went to individuals working at research institutions in the United Kingdom (48), followed by Germany (47), the Netherlands (32) and France (29). The overall spread covered 23 European nations.

Applications were submitted by 64 scientists – male and female – at the Max Planck Society. Ten approvals represent an internal success rate of around 16 percent.

However, it is not just the grant recipients themselves who will benefit from the EU program – this funding will enable 291 excellent project leaders to recruit postdocs and doctoral students for their research teams, thus supporting a new generation of scientists.

The following applicants can look forward to receiving funding:

- Catherine Crockford and Amanda Henry (MPI for Evolutionary Anthropology)
- Alexander Stein (MPI for Biophysical Chemistry)
- Anke Henning (MPI for Biological Cybernetics)
- John Travers (MPI for the Science of Light), Jens Bardarson (MPI for the Physics of Complex Systems)
- Fabian Schmidt (MPI for Astrophysics)
- Yaowen Wu and Tom Grossmann (MPI of Molecular Physiology) and
- Christian Groß (MPI of Quantum Optics).



Exchange of Ideas on Syrian Law

Max Planck Institute employs refugee lawyers – the joint effort also benefits the authorities

Will a marriage entered into by Syrian citizens prior to escaping from the territory controlled by the Islamic State terrorist regime be recognized in Europe? In order to facilitate research into issues such as this, refugee Syrian lawyers are supporting a new research project by the Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law. In parallel, the researchers are assisting with applications and meetings with authorities. Support for integration meets scientific added value.

Like so many of their fellow countrymen, Ahmad Jarken, Hussam Al-Asmi and Bilal Hajjo fled from Syria and are now trying to settle in Germany. Back home, they studied law or even worked as attorneys, but their qualifications are of little use in Germany – they know about Syrian law, but not German law.

In the newly launched research project on family law in Syria, however, their knowledge of Syrian law is precisely what is needed. Since late January 2016, the three Syrians have

been assisting the Max Planck “Changes in God’s Law” Research Group. They are paid as interns and work half-days at the Institute – leaving time, as in Bilal Hajjo’s case, to attend external courses in German. The 31-year-old, who fled with his wife and child and now lives in an apartment in Hamburg, still prefers to speak English, in which he is more fluent; but “my German is getting better,” says Hajjo. “I am very pleased to have this chance to contribute my experiences.”

The internship is currently set to last for three months. It is intended to serve as a building block to aid the academics in finding their own perspective, while at the same time offering them the opportunity to actively use their knowledge. “The flood of refugees is presenting European authorities and courts with some very specific issues regarding applicable law in crisis areas such as Syria and Iraq,” explains Research Group Leader Nadjma Yassari. Family relationships that would have to be proven as part of the asylum pro-

cedure may have been formed under national law, or they may have been created in autonomous territories under external control. How does one treat documents issued in these autonomous areas? How does one assess purely religiously contracted marriages, or for that matter the civil marriages recently introduced in Kurdish territories? Can polygamous marriages be recognized, and are the children of such marriages regarded as legitimate? “All these pieces of information are important when considering requests for subsequent immigration of family members. At the same time, they also afford the authorities insight into a legal system that may seem very alien to them. Our Syrian colleagues aren’t just sources of data, they are also mediators of a different understanding of law,” emphasizes Yassari.

Data alone is a problem, since the scientists working with Yassari, whose project receives funding from the Max Planck Foundation, usually conduct field research on site. This helps them identify differences between written law and actual legal practice. Given that court records are scarcely available from Syria at present, Bilal Hajjo contributes his own knowledge as an attorney. “With the aid of his legal diary, he is reconstructing and making written records of cases he worked on in Syria,” says Dr. Yassari. Ahmad Jarken and Hussam Al-Asmi are carrying out additional research into Syria’s patchwork legal landscape. The medium-term aim is to publish the results on a website. Relevant fields of law such as international private law, family and inheritance law and procedural law will be treated systematically and made available to a wide audience. Ideally, this will assist courts and authorities in reaching appropriate decisions. The Institute has long been receiving requests for expert opinions on precisely this subject.

Discussing matters at the Institute library: Research Group Leader Nadjma Yassari with Bilal Hajjo, Hussam Al-Asmi and Ahmad Jarken (left to right).



Photo: Tom Pingel