Anniversary – The Max Planck Society has two occasions to celebrate in 2008: the 60th anniversary of the Society and the 150th birthday of its namesake Max Planck. The great physicist remains a role model for us. In the early 20th century, he revolutionized the world of science with his theory of heat radiation. Had he not discovered the constant $h$ that bears his name, modern technologies such as lasers and microelectronics could never have been developed. Max Planck was also a successful science manager. He considered his most important task to be to protect the freedom of research. To achieve this goal, as President of the Kaiser Wilhelm Society (KWS) from 1930 to 1937, he was forced to make difficult political compromises with the National Socialists. After the war ended, and despite his advanced age, Planck again made himself available as interim President and ultimately agreed that the KWS would be renamed after him. In this respect, he wrote: “May the Max Planck Society [...] always be aware that, independent of the ebb and flow of time, it must remain committed solely to scientific truth.” We have an obligation to this legacy.

History – We may not be holding a separate event to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Max Planck Society, but the occasion offers an opportunity to look back. The meeting at which the Society was founded was a modest affair on February 26, 1948, in the canteen of the dismantled Aerodynamic Experimental Institute in Göttingen. There were, however, some notable scientific figures in attendance, among them Nobel laureates Otto Hahn (who accepted the office of President), Walter Bothe, Max von Laue, Richard Kuhn and Adolf Windaus. In the following six decades, the Max Planck Society has successfully established and developed numerous institutes, addressed new areas of research and, at all times, maintained a very high standard. An additional 17 Max Planck scientists have since been honored with Nobel Prizes. International studies tell us that the Society today ranks among the leading research organizations worldwide. Of course there have been, and continue to be, challenges to overcome – whether externally, in convincing politicians and the public of the importance of basic research in order to secure financing for our work, or internally, in developing new fields of research and attracting truly outstanding minds.

Profit – Right from the start, another concern has been to identify and promote new generations of scientific talent. For eight years now, our International Max Planck Research Schools (IMPRS) have provided a particularly successful medium through which to train graduate students and offer them an interdisciplinary route to a doctorate. In cooperation with universities, each IMPRS creates its own development program designed to offer gifted graduates extensive support and encouragement. There are now 52 Research Schools throughout Germany. They attract gifted young scientists from around the world – two-thirds of the doctoral students come from abroad. The standard for selection is very high. On average, only one in six candidates is offered a place. We are now broadening the successful pattern set by the IMPRS: a new Max Planck Graduate Center is being established together with the University of Mainz. Max Planck scientists will be directly involved in the process of awarding doctorates, which in turn will streamline decision-making and improve transparency. And the role of the Max Planck Institutes in training doctoral candidates will become much more visible. Our young scientists will benefit just as much as Mainz itself.

A Name That Entails an Obligation

PHOTO : ANTJE MEINEN

Peter Gruss, President of the Max Planck Society.

NOTES FROM THE PRESIDENT