

Cooperation Worth Celebrating

Science celebrates 50 years of German-Israeli relations



Half a century has passed since Germany and Israel established diplomatic relations. To mark this anniversary, scientists from both countries, the presidents of leading research organizations, and political guests met in Israel for a two-day celebration. The event was co-organized by the Minerva Stiftung, a subsidiary of the Max Planck Society that is financed by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research and that has been promoting scientific cooperation between the two countries since 1964. "I firmly believe that nobody could have predicted such a development 50 years ago," said Max Planck President Martin Stratmann, stressing that "in view of our particular history, promoting mutual understanding remains an important task."

The high point of the celebrations was a scientific symposium held at the Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot and officially launched by the German Federal Minister of Education and Research, Johanna Wanka. The Minister also inaugurated two new Minerva Research Centers, bringing the total to 23 of these centers of excellence in Israel. "The Minerva Centers are the jewel in the crown of German-Israeli scientific relations. They have also become an important feature of the Israeli research landscape," said Johanna Wanka.

In his speech at the anniversary celebrations, Max Planck President Stratmann emphasized the unifying nature of science: "People from different countries can meet on neutral ground, so to speak, in scientific institutions." This was also the basis for German-Israeli scientific relations, which have existed now for more than 55 years.

Green Light for Research Projects

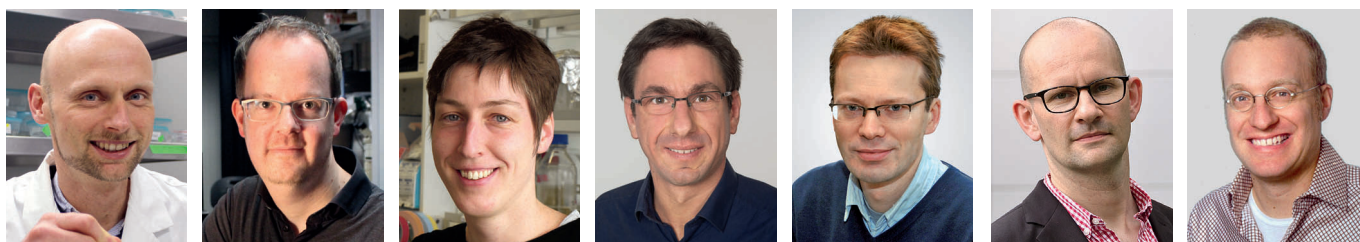
Max Planck scientists attract EU millions for their projects

The 328 junior scientists awarded Starting Grants by the European Research Council (ERC) last December include 17 Max Planck scientists. The funding of up to two million euros allocated to the 17 Max Planck researchers is intended to help them with the development of independent scientific careers in the period immediately following their doctoral studies. A further seven scientists from Max Planck

institutes also competed successfully for ERC Consolidator Grants. The Teaming funding line is a new element of the "Horizon 2020" EU Research Framework Programme, which links renowned research institutions with institutes in regions that perform less strongly in the area of research. The Max Planck Society played a key role in the design of this instrument. Four Max Planck institutes were successful

in their applications for the funding of projects with partners from Bulgaria, Poland and Cyprus.

The Max Planck scientists recently awarded Consolidator Grants (from left): Jochen Rink and Jan Huisken (molecular cytology and genetics), Birte Höcker (developmental biology), Sönke Zaehle (biogeochemistry), Mikael Simons (experimental medicine), Jonas Obleser (cognitive and neurosciences) and Henrik Beuther (astronomy).



The Max Planck Society Researches Its Own History

Seven-year program focuses on the organization's development

Over the next seven years, a research program at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science will examine the development of the Max Planck Society from its foundation in 1948 to the end of Hubert Markl's presidency in 2002. The program is intended to investigate the organization's dynamics and research successes, as well as its scientific dead ends, which, however, often proved productive in the final analysis. The program will also concentrate on critical topics like the ethical limits of research, the dual-use problem and external influences. Building on the studies on the Kaiser Wilhelm Society during the National Socialist period, the scientists also intend to take a fresh look at how the Max Planck Society dealt with the misconduct of its predecessor organization.

The research program, whose participants include renowned external scholars, aims to comprehensively reconstruct the past and classify it in terms of the relevant historical contexts. Based on the example of several inter-institutional topics, the historians wish to concretely examine how the in-



The history of the Max Planck Society began in 1948. The inaugural meeting took place in the canteen of the Institute for Aerodynamic Testing (Aerodynamische Versuchsanstalt) in Göttingen.

stitution's research and development mutually influenced each other. The focus here is on the changes of the Max Planck Society through time with a

view to its position in science, society and politics. The research program will be supervised by an international scientific advisory board.

Max Planck Spinoff Finds Buyer with Deep Pockets

US concern Baxter takes over biotech company SuppreMol

How the knowledge gained through basic research stimulates the economy was demonstrated by the sale of SuppreMol GmbH in March: Established in 2002 by scientists working with Nobel laureate Robert Huber from the Max Planck Institute of Biochemistry in Martinsried, the biotech company carries out research on innovative drugs for the treatment of autoimmune diseases such as multiple sclerosis. The advances achieved by the com-

pany, which has 20 employees, made it so attractive that US pharmaceutical concern Baxter was willing to pay over 200 million euros for it.

"This was one of the biggest transactions in the sector, which has been experiencing funding difficulties, particularly in Germany, for years," says Ulrich Mahr, a member of the management team of Max-Planck-Innovation GmbH. The Max Planck Society's technology transfer

agency supported the development of SuppreMol, particularly in the company's pre-spinoff and early phase. The fact that SuppreMol succeeded in attracting a strong owner like Baxter for the expensive clinical development and market preparation of its drugs has been warmly welcomed. The Max Planck Society and the Max Planck Institute will also benefit from the sale and stand to receive sums in the lower single-digit million range.

“It’s not surprising that the fear was palpable”

Anita Schroven from the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology is still helping to manage the Ebola crisis in West Africa



Anita Schroven

When field researchers aren’t out in the field, they have no problem participating in the unfolding events from their desks at home thanks to technology. Anita Schroven, an academic staff member in the “Integration and Conflict along the Upper Guinea Coast (West Africa)” research group, is in contact with Guinea. She lived in the West African country for one year. As is the case in neighboring Sierra Leone and Liberia, the threat of new Ebola infections hasn’t been entirely eliminated there.

Out of sight, out of mind: Ms. Schroven, how should we see the current situation in West Africa from our European perspective?

Anita Schroven: The good news is coming from Liberia at the moment: there have been no new cases of Ebola there since March 22. Given that the incubation period for the disease is 21 days, this gives us cause for hope. To be on the safe side, the World Health Organization (WHO) has decreed that, for a country to be declared Ebola-free, a period of 42 days must pass since the last case tested negative twice. Although the number of new Ebola cases is falling in Sierra Leone, people are still contracting the disease and the transmission routes aren’t yet known. The number of new Ebola patients in Guinea is stagnating.

So, we can’t say that the Ebola outbreak is coming to an end?

No, unfortunately not. This isn’t the perception on site either. People are able to move freely between the three countries. The border controls don’t prevent this, but they are having an impact on trade. Food prices are increasing and this is contributing to an increase in hunger in the region.

Where do you get your information from?

I am in contact with acquaintances involved in field research, and follow reports on the radio and Internet. I also maintain contact with experts in the field – anthropologists and other social scientists involved in fighting the Ebola outbreak and working with the WHO, Médecins Sans Frontières, the Red Cross and the UN mission, as well as the network to which I belong. We debate specialist issues and can pass on research findings about local practices.

You carried out research in Guinea on ideas and practices of state and statehood in the local context. Are there links between this and Ebola?

The question as to the extent to which the population can trust state structures arises in Guinea, in particular. This has a lot to do with the history of the country, which gained independence in 1958 but was then governed by two dictators for 50 years. The political arena has become increasingly ethnicized in recent years. The president’s group is accused of profiting more than others from the state mining revenue. There’s a lot of distrust.

Naturally, this is disastrous in the context of Ebola.

The population perceives government intervention as negative, as it is often associated with violence and corruption. Measures carried out in the areas of infrastructure, education and healthcare tend to be ascribed to international aid. The idea of civil society is still a recent one in Guinea.

But comprehensive external aid was rapidly required for Ebola. How was that managed? That was a major challenge for all three countries. People were used to international intervention in Sierra Leone and Liberia, as both countries had been subject to UN mandates after the civil wars there. At that time, refugee aid was provided to people from neighboring countries in Guinea at the expense of the local population. So it isn’t surprising that the reservations and fear were palpable when people wearing astronaut suits arrived, accompanied by people from the ministry of health, saying

things that the locals didn’t understand and presenting a risk scenario that didn’t encourage cooperation – especially as there were huge information campaigns conveying the message that there is no cure or treatment for Ebola.

But people realized that this approach wouldn’t achieve the desired results – or did they?

Yes, first of all, the communication was improved. Instead of sending representatives from central government, local dignitaries were involved. Village elders, religious leaders and leaders from the initiation societies lend greater legitimacy to such processes. Secondly, consistent use was made of the media; discussion forums in which people could participate by cell phone were transmitted on the radio. Moreover, it was essential to ensure that the information is available in the local languages.

Was at least the initial medical position clear?

Even among researchers, there was and is no consensus: How reliably can the knowledge gained from earlier outbreaks be applied? How different are the situations in the individual countries? Just one example: in Liberia, they changed the recommendation for sexual contact for Ebola survivors from 90 days of abstinence and now advise people to use condoms until there is greater clarity on the issue. But people sit up and take notice when different information is suddenly in circulation. They assume, for example, that their own government wants to harm them.

What’s next for your research?

We’re planning a conference in Halle in October, where the current field research will be linked with theories concerning knowledge production and translation. We want to know which information was available where and what kind of knowledge was disseminated, as the degree of knowledge fragmentation is very high. The complexity of knowledge generation and translation alone can explain why, despite the information available from earlier Ebola outbreaks, it wasn’t possible to prevent an epidemic of the current scale. Interview: Susanne Beer

New Internet Presence for max-wissen.de

Relaunch of the successful German-language website for students and teachers now online

To mark its tenth anniversary, the German-language website max-wissen.de has a completely new look. In addition to the traditional “MAX-Heft” dossiers, the very latest information, images, and now also high-quality videos can be found there on fascinating topics from research, such as plant immunity, stem cells, climate change and biomaterials. The Max Planck Society launched the knowledge portal in 2005 with the help of funding from the *Stiftenverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft*. Since then, it has become a

popular destination for both teachers and students. Here, they can access information about current research topics and obtain more in-depth information than in standard school textbooks. The material presented on max-wissen.de makes the everyday lives and activities of scientists more transparent: How do researchers obtain their results? What methods do they use?

The website has supplemented the published MAX series, BIOMAX, GEOMAX and TECHMAX, since the late 1990s. The number of orders received for these dossiers show that far in excess of 100,000 students work on content from the Max Planck Society every year. The information contained in the dossiers has even found its way into the *Abitur*, the German school-leaving examination, in some federal states.

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 Animations, video clips, the MAX series, background information and teaching support material: the max-wissen.de teacher's portal offers up-to-date, informative and fascinating material for school classes free of charge.



On the Net



Our City

The German-American youth portal “Step into German” of the Goethe Institut familiarizes young people with music, film and soccer in Germany, as well as the German language. In the new series “Our City,” members of the band Tonbandgerät present Hamburg and explain where they spend their free time, what they like to eat and where they go shopping. This whets the appetite for a visit to the Hanseatic city and may even trigger a desire to study and live there. www.goethe.de/ins/us/saf/prj/stg/enindex.htm

Observing Apes on the PC

Welcome to Africa! Primate researchers from the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology built camera traps in 14 African countries to record thousands of film sequences. The recordings must now be evaluated. Since April 22, the public can view the material on the new citizen science platform “Chimp & See” and in this way help the primatologists with their work. It is sometimes the case that there is nothing to see for quite a while. Then, a warthog may suddenly appear on the screen before a group of chimpanzees engages in some leisurely grooming in front of the camera. www.chimpanzee.org

The Art of Packaging in the Cell

We are more than the sum of our genes. Environmental factors can affect our chromosomes. This alters the tightness of the DNA packaging – and this dictates, in turn, whether a particular gene can be read or not. As our new film *Epigenetics – Packaging Art in the Cell* shows, the environment can shape our characteristics over generations in this way. <https://youtu.be/86H4olxRx7E>