Nummer 40 2023

Von Bakterien, Menschen und Wissenschaften

Symposium anlässlich des 70. Geburtstages des XXVI. Präsidenten der Leopoldina Jörg Hacker

am 5. Juli 2022 im Festsaal des Hauptgebäudes der Nationalen Akademie der Wissenschaften Leopoldina, Jägerberg 1, in Halle (Saale)

Herausgegeben von
Gerald HAUG (Halle/Saale, Berlin)
Präsident der Akademie

und

Diethard TAUTZ (Plön)
Director Ephemeridum der Akademie
Die Schriftenreihe *NAL-miscellanea* erscheint bei der Wissenschaftlichen Verlagsgesellschaft Stuttgart, Birkenwaldstraße 44, 70191 Stuttgart, Bundesrepublik Deutschland.

Die Schriftenreihe wird gefördert durch das Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung sowie das Ministerium für Wissenschaft, Energie, Klimaschutz und Umwelt des Landes Sachsen-Anhalt.

Bitte zu beachten:
Die *NAL-miscellanea* bilden bibliographisch die Fortsetzung der *Nova Acta Leopoldina, Neue Folge, Supplemente* Nr. 1–39.

**Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek**
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über https://portal.dnb.de abrufbar.

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My dear Joerg, Margit, and Gerald, all my dear friends and colleagues,

I apologize for not being able to speak in German. I took a German course during my doctoral studies to be able to read German legal material, but speaking would be difficult for me.

I am excited and delighted to be here on this glorious birthday-celebration honoring our beloved friend Joerg. My warmest congratulations, Joerg, for this, and for the award of the prestigious Koch prize.

The Jewish Sages give a meaning to each decade in a person’s age. They say about the age of seventy that it marks fullness of years, in the sense that a person’s personality is fully exposed in that age. We did not have to wait for that age to see the wonderful traits of Joerg’s personality, but we are very happy to celebrate together on this wonderful occasion.

I was asked to relate to Joerg’s activity on the international level, and I’ll be happy to share with you some of my insights about Universities, international scientific cooperation, and then relate to Joerg’s monumental role in this respect.

Scholarly tradition has been part of Israeli culture along thousands of years, but our universities were molded according to the European research university of the 19th century, formulated by Wilhelm von Humboldt in Berlin, and originated in the Middle Ages university concept. So let’s return for a while to the 12th century, to Bologna, where the first university was established. During that period, thousands of students from all over Europe came to Bologna to study law, medicine and theology, as well as the seven wisdoms: grammar, rhetorics, logic, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music. Following Bologna, dozens of universities were founded in Europe, based more or less on this model. How could thousands of students from around Europe come to Bologna to study together? In the disintegrated, conflicted world of pre-Renaissance Europe, the universities constituted universal organizations, which crossed boundaries of language, culture and political entities. They taught the same material, in one language – Latin, and granted the same degrees to students, and the same academic ranks to teachers. Members of the university community – men only – lived according to an identical code throughout Europe. They were to some extent monks,
outside of the church, who dedicated themselves to the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge. This enabled university teachers, as well as its students, to move from one place to another, and feel at home in Oxford, Paris, Bologna, Heidelberg or Prague. They were united by one language, common tradition and knowledge, and especially by one strong passion, which was not tied to a specific location: the passion of knowledge and truth.

The world of global culture and knowledge, detached from any specific location, was transformed with the establishment of the nation state, a process which reached its peak in the 19th century. The universities too became national institutions. Latin was rejected as the “lingua franca” of universities, as each state adopted its own teaching language. The national approach was accompanied by the rise of other movements, this time more liberal in nature. Gradually, universities were opened to women, to different religions, and to other ethnic groups. The unity that prevailed in the early days of the university was gradually replaced by variety and diversity.

Today, about a thousand years after the establishment of the first university, the bells of globalization are loudly ringing once again. The globalization process is manifested in trade, communication, law, and knowledge. The internet – whose importance is comparable only to the invention of the printing press – can create and maintain a virtual, utopian academy, which transcends time and space, and is located both everywhere and nowhere.

Universities are natural carriers of the globalization process. Knowledge is not enclosed within boundaries, nor is it attached to a certain place. However, the conditions which transformed the university into a global entity a thousand years ago have dramatically changed. Globalization means a common denominator. It is true that the English language has replaced Latin as the Academy’s lingua franca, but we are not united by the same faith, gender, ethnic background, or values.

We do not mourn the passing of the monolithic academic world of the past, which was only accessible to European, white, Catholic, single men. The current model is compatible with the basic values of Liberal Democracy, and is far more abundant than the former model. Yet we have not yet succeeded in overcoming the legacy of social exclusion, and we have the obligation to advance women and minorities.

Higher education has become accessible to the entire public, through models which distinguish between research institutions and institutions of academic education. However, the current model is fraught with tensions which did not exist in the past. Indeed the global model that was recently borne and optimistically welcomed is now threatened. Our world is characterized by cultural and political conflicts, each culture claiming recognition, supremacy and exclusion of the other. The tensions are reflected in the subjects of instruction, as well as in the topics of research, mainly in the fields of Humanities and social science, perhaps less so in natural sciences.

Yet the basic values of the university have not been changed. They are rooted in the aspiration for knowledge and the quest for truth which is the categorical imperative of science. The quest for truth is the foundation of creative ideas, of innovative thought. However, as truth becomes relative and evasive, we are obligated to constant self-examination. When new truths are discovered, it is our mandate to approach them with open mind even if they are contrary to our previous assumptions. It follows therefore, that the investigation of truth must involve freedom and tolerance. Academic freedom should be guaranteed without political or social bias.
In Israel, a young pioneering country, with many communities adhering to different values we are accustomed to arguments and to rejection of authority. In a way this derives from the long tradition of Biblical interpretation. In the process of interpretation there are conflicting views. There are arguments. There are different schools. Learning has been always coupled with argumentation. That means that you do not automatically agree with the view of your predecessor or even with the view of your religious leader.

That culture of arguments, casting doubts, not bending to authority, is the essence of free intellectual life that leads to innovation in theory and in practice.

And this is combined with academic freedom. Academic freedom allows us to investigate without fear. This is its negative aspect, expressed in the freedom from tyranny and authority. However, this freedom also has a positive aspect: it imposes an obligation. It imposes on us norms of uncompromising professionalism.

The quest for truth, which describes both the creative drive, and the obligation entailed in the fulfillment of this drive, unites the entire scientific world and the scientists themselves.

The quest for truth and the desire for knowledge create a unified language, which connects foreigners and those who are distant. The language of science overcomes cultural, national, religious and gender differences. It transcends boundaries. No wonder that Israeli Nobel Laureates have succeeded in winning the prize due to collaborations with scientists in the United States and Germany. This is the case, for example, of Ada Yonath who was working in the Max Planck institute in Hamburg. We must therefore guarantee universal cooperation that will allow us to provide working conditions that would produce the future breakthroughs.

There is no place for any boycott in this world. The corona crisis has proven overwhelmingly the achievements of science. It has also demonstrated that international scientific cooperation is essential.

And here stands the towering figure of Joerg Hacker. Joerg personifies the values upon which scientific research is founded – freedom, tolerance, quest for truth, professionalism and the recognition that science does not have any borders. Since the first day we’ve met – it was in 2015 in Jerusalem – we have forged a very deep friendship. The occasion then was a chemistry conference between the Leopoldina and the Israeli Academy to mark the 50th anniversary of the diplomatic relations between Germany and Israel. In the opening message of that conference I said the following:

In the heydays of the Jewish emancipation in Germany, German Scientists from Jewish descent made enormous contributions to science, and some were members of the Leopoldina. Suffice to mention one name, Albert Einstein. The dark days left a tragic mark on Germany, on Jews and science. But the duty to remember does not prevent us from establishing a thriving and impressive collaboration as well as warm personal friendships between our two nations; between our two academies and between us personally.

Joerg Hacker, my dear friend, is a great supporter of Israeli science and of Israel in general. Following the anti-semitic event in Halle a few years ago he sent us a heartfelt letter of support. We were all deeply moved. Following the bilateral symposia in neuroscience which were established by the then president, Prof. Volker ter Meulen, we fortified the scientific bonds by further collaborations in the social sciences. We had a memorable conference in Berlin on law and economics, and another one in Jerusalem on computational archaeology. Joerg was the linking figure uniting activities that crossed borders and oceans. He stood behind an initiative in Euroscience – to build a cooperation among Lincei, Leopoldina, French Academy des Sciences, Polish Academy, and Israel Acad-
emy – to discuss the phenomenon of brain drain. He initiated a trilateral cooperation – Leopoldina, The National Academy of Sciences (NAS, USA) and Israel Academy – to discuss the fascinating topic of “Democracy and Digitization” – this was held via zoom during the corona days. I saw Joerg leading a panel of scientists at the STS conference in Kyoto on “Trust in Science”. It was a model of cooperation, dignity, wisdom, integrity and leadership. The seeds that you, Joerg, planted, ripened into a flowering orchard that the current president, my dear friend Gerald, continues to lovingly cultivate. Gerald honored us with a wonderful visit to Israel a few days ago. Thank you so much.

I would like to conclude with Erasmus, Goethe and Heine. Erasmus, the last great intellectual of a united Christian Europe, rejected offers of professorships from the most prestigious universities proclaiming himself “citizen of the world”. No wonder the European program for international students’ exchange bears his name. Goethe, who – I am happy to humbly mention – studied law and was working in the legal profession, followed Erasmus in that respect. He was a definite internationalist, who, though Weimaraner, proclaimed to be a world citizen. I can cite Goethe’s words with a small change, and attribute it to Joerg – Ich bin Weltbewohner … Bin Berliner …

Yes, Joerg Hacker is a vivid example of the virtue to be at the same time a professor in the most prestigious institutes in Germany and a citizen of the world. In all his activities as a scientist, an academic leader and a person, Joerg strove to excellence, professionalism, peace, and world cooperation.

Heinrich Heine, who I may also humbly mention as another cultural hero who studied law, though he was not interested in it at all – lamented in a short poem about his inability to accomplish the most important thing a person should strive for:

“Freundschaft, Liebe, Stein der Weisen,
Diese dreie hört ich preisen,
Und ich pries und suchte sie,
Aber ach! ich fand sie nie.”

Heine in his bitter-sweet poetry expressed a pessimistic view. Joerg has every reason to be optimistic. He has it all. He created profound friendships with professional colleagues and leaders of all foreign academies; he had gained the love of everybody, most important of which – the love of dear Margit and his charming family; and he possessed the philosopher’s stone which enabled him to transform our understanding about the world and its natural secrets for the welfare of science and society.

Dear Joerg, we all have been fortunate to have you, as friend, scientist and an academic leader, situated in Berlin, but a beloved citizen of the whole world. Many happy returns! Thank you for inviting me to be with you; thank you all!

Prof. Dr. Nili Cohen
Faculty of Law
Tel-Aviv University P. O. B. 39040
Tel-Aviv 69978
Israel
E-Mail: nilico@tauex.tau.ac.il