

Würzburg, my second home

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Every time I visit Germany for academic reasons, I end up in this beautiful city, which has become my second home. For the past 20 years I have come to Würzburg to work as a guest researcher at the University. This would not have been possible without the support of two Professors from the Uni-Würzburg, Prof. Dr. Robert Schmidt, Institute of Physiology, and Prof. Dr. Heidrun Moll, Institute of Molecular Biology of Infectious Diseases (ZINF).

But, how did this whole story begin? My husband, Prof. Dr. Horacio Vanegas-Fischbach was a Humboldt fellow (or “Humboldtianer”, as the Alexander-von-Humboldt Foundation likes to call its “protégées”) in the 1970s and stayed in Germany for one year as a guest researcher at the Max-Planck Institute, Munich. Afterwards he came to Germany in two or three additional opportunities, with support from the Humboldt Foundation. But then he changed his area of research and did not return again very often. In 1994, the Humboldt Foundation decided to select specific Humboldtianer and invited them to travel through Germany and visit diverse laboratories, to encourage them to resume their academic contacts with German scientists. My husband accepted the invitation and came to visit, among others, Prof. Dr. Robert Schmidt, Chairman of Human Physiology at the Uni-Würzburg.

It was the beginning of September 1994; at this same time I was attending a meeting in Woods Hole, USA, on parasitic diseases. I met there Prof. Dr. Michael Lanzer, who was then working here at the Uni Würzburg. We talked about the plans my husband and I had to come to Würzburg, and discussed the possibility of finding a scientist at the ZINF that could host me. I do research on *Leishmania*, the parasite that causes leishmaniasis in tropical countries. Prof. Lanzer gave me the name and e-mail of Prof. Dr. Heidrun Moll, an expert in the immunology of leishmaniasis and who later became vice-president of the Uni-Würzburg.

Upon returning to Caracas, Venezuela, and learning that Prof. Schmidt had agreed to host my husband at the Institute of Physiology, I immediately wrote to Prof. Moll and explained to her that I would love to visit her and work in her laboratory for one or two months already in the next year, 1995. Her positive answer came immediately; six months later both, my husband and I were already here, sponsored by my home university, the Central University of Venezuela. My husband spent three months and I spent two months, working in our respective laboratories and thus initiating this marvelous interaction with the city of Würzburg, its magic atmosphere and the excellence of its university.

In March 1995 my husband went to pick me up at the airport. We traveled to Würzburg by train and went to the Guest House of the university at Sanderring, Studentenhaus-1, where we would stay for the next months. Our small apartment was in the 10th floor, and upon entering it, the big glass window allowed me to admire the magnificence of the fortress (Festung am Marienberg), already that evening. I went to sleep, of course very tired, and as the morning arrived I opened the curtains and could not believe what I was seeing: for the first time in my life, snowflakes falling from the sky, it was snowing!!! It is difficult to explain the emotion I was experiencing. Can you imagine a 38 years old lady, for the first time in her life seeing how the snow falls from the sky? Impossible to forget.

Those two months were packed with diverse experiences: walking in the snow and hearing its sound while you pace; listening at the tolling of bells from many churches, each carrying a

message of crystalline hope; absorbing the wine culture of Franconia, so unique in the world; learning many of the techniques that were used in the laboratory; attending seminars all over the university; everything in this magic atmosphere, and surrounded by my very few words in German, since my vocabulary and the comprehension of the language was very little at that time. But the people that were close to me were patient and ready to teach me everything they could. The message I always sent them was clear, for science, we would talk in English, for everyday life we would talk in German.

And those two months went by, and I worked very hard in my project, and by next year we could publish the results we had obtained. Since then my husband and I became addicted to this small city, full of experiences not only from the academic point of view, but also from the point of view of culture, music, wine and friendship. We return to Würzburg any time we can, almost every year. This means that I have the privilege to have walked through almost every corner and street of the old city, and to feel comfortable in each church, museum, park or theater I visit here.

Coming back to Würzburg for so many years has transformed our experience; we do not feel ourselves as outsiders in this city. We already belong to this culture. We have collected friends, both German and from many areas of the world. We have learned about the many cultures that surround us when we come here. We have visited small cities, big cities, museums and churches, theaters, you name it! We have discussed with friends about numerous themes. We have gone to all the concerts - big or small- you can imagine. We have converted this place in our second home. This place adopted us. We have even introduced to local friends, colleagues, students, the footsteps of Alexander-von-Humboldt in America, as well as his intriguing personality, and have enjoyed sharing with them how beloved he is in our country.

But, what have I done in Würzburg? Initially at the laboratory of Prof. Moll my work was focused towards *Leishmania* parasite metabolism, membrane transporters essential for parasite survival or involved in the development of resistance to drugs, and proteins related to its cellular differentiation and parasite-host interaction. Then during 1999-2000 I returned to Würzburg with a fellowship from the Alexander-von-Humboldt Foundation and worked on surface molecules from *Leishmania* parasites that are fundamental for the signaling toward the immune system of their host. Afterwards, from 2003-2007, I returned again to Würzburg and worked on the characterization of natural products and target-oriented compounds as potential leishmanicidal agents, within the frame of the a multi-disciplinary and multi-centric project "Identification and characterization of natural products and compounds designed against specific targets (bacteria, fungi and parasites) as anti-infectious agents", financed by the German Council for Research (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft). These projects were done at the laboratory of Prof. Moll. Since 2009 I return almost every year to Würzburg, now to the Medical Mission Institute-Würzburg, invited by Prof. Dr. August Stich. My work now is related to potential parasitocidal agents focused preferentially on *Trypanosoma brucei*. This continuous interaction with German scientists and German institutions, as well as the life-long collaboration and friendship thus established, have been crucial for my professional career and academic development. I am extremely grateful for that.

I cannot finish this small writing without mentioning the following: We, as visiting scholars, often come to Würzburg for a few months, or sometimes, as already mentioned, for longer periods. Since many years ago, a group of German ladies take care of us to make us feel at home, and they succeed, always. Every second Wednesday during the academic semesters, in the University Guest House right next to the University Mensa, these dear ladies host us with social evenings that include a versatile program. For example participants tell from their home countries or give interesting lectures. Additionally, we are offered different excursions, concerts and visits to cities, museums,

castles and industries. Once a year we are offered a potluck dinner, in which each participant brings a dish. These ladies are unforgettable and their dedication deserves the greatest reward, our immense gratefulness.

Prof. Dr Alicia Ponte-Sucre holds a Magister Scientiarum in Biology (Physiology and Biophysics) (1981) from the Venezuelan Institute of Scientific Research (IVIC) and a Doctor of Sciences (Pharmacology) (1993) from the Central University of Venezuela (UCV). She is Full Professor in Human Physiology at the Faculty of Medicine, UCV. She has been lecturer at the Graduate Course of Cellular Biology, School of Biology, UCV; Graduate Courses of Hand Surgery, Dermatology, Endocrinology, Pharmacology and Physiological Sciences at the Faculties of Pharmacy and Medicine, UCV, as well as invited lecturer in diverse courses and symposia and visiting Professor at Cinvestav, Mexico, Institute of Molecular Biology of Infectious Diseases, Würzburg, Germany, Institute for Molecular and Cell Biology, Porto, Portugal, and Universidad of Antioquia, Colombia. She has been member of academic committees at the Faculty of Medicine, Institute of Experimental Medicine and Rectorate, UCV; member of the Directorates of the Association for the Progress of University Research, UCV and Venezuelan Association for the Advancement of Sciences, and Vice-president of the Directorate of the University Foundation Fundadiagnóstica. She has been member of the organizing committee of congresses and national symposia, Coordinator of the Graduate Program in Physiological Sciences, Chairman of the Department of Human Physiology and Coordinator for the Scientific Affairs of the Faculty of Medicine, UCV. She has several scientific affiliations in her field and acts as external advisor of diverse national and international institutions for projects and scholarships and referee for national and international journals. She is member of the Directorate of the Venezuelan-German cultural organization, named Humboldt Cultural Association. This corporation was founded in Caracas in 1949, with the special task of deepening the ties between Venezuela and Germany, and to promote cultural scientific exchanges between the two countries.