Past and Present of FIZ CHEMIE Berlin: Interview with Dr. René Deplanque, Managing Director

By Svetla Baykoucheva
Chemical Information Bulletin, Spring 2010, Vol. 62, No. 1, p. 24-26

Dr. René Deplanque was born in 1950 in Lübeck, northern Germany. After completing his Diploma studies as a chemical engineer in Hamburg, he obtained a Master's of Science degree in electrochemistry and a Masters of Philosophy degree in physical chemistry at Sir John Cass College, Guild Hall University, London. After subsequently gaining his Doctor of Philosophy degree in engineering sciences, in addition to his research activities, he taught electrochemistry and physical chemistry at the University of Cambridge. After returning to Germany in 1983, he worked for Brown Boveri in Mannheim where he was Head of the Electrochemistry Laboratory and Head of the Computer Department for the company's German operations, and also served as assistant to the Board. In 1988 he moved to the Gmelin Institute of the Max Planck Gesellschaft and was Head of the Gmelin-Online Project. In 1994 he became Managing Director of the Fachinformationszentrum CHEMIE GmbH in Berlin (FIZ CHEMIE Berlin; the Chemistry Information Center); a position which he holds to the present day. In 2000 René Deplanque was appointed Professor of the Technical University Berlin. He is a member of various national and international committees. He acts as adviser to several organizations and governments.

More information on FIZ CHEMIE Berlin is available at www.fiz-chemie.de/en/center/fiz-chemie/company.html

Svetla Baykoucheva: Many readers of the Chemical Information Bulletin are familiar with FIZ CHEMIE, and some members of the ACS Chemical Information Division (CINF) have even been directly affiliated with it through their employment. It would be interesting to hear from you about some important moments in the history of the organization, what its philosophy is, and what distinguishes it from other players in the chemical information field. What are the most important things you would like our readers to know about FIZ CHEMIE?

René Deplanque: Our history goes as far back as1830 when we were founded as "pharmaceutical abstracting service." In 1840 the name was changed to "Chemisches Zentralblatt," which existed until 1969. We continued as a Department of the German Chemical Society and produced the first ChemInform Reaction Handbook in print. In 1981, the German Center for Chemical Information, FIZ CHEMIE Berlin, was founded, and the ChemInform editorial board formed the basis of this institute.

FIZ CHEMIE Berlin (FCH) is now the leading German information center for chemistry. As an Institute of the Leibniz community, it cooperates actively in the organization of the information society in Germany. The major task of the Institute is to provide scientists, teachers and the industry with high quality information services for general chemistry, chemical technology and adjacent areas. The FCH mission statement is: ?We want to make information understandable and usable.? This is done along this line: research—development—production— distribution—support and happens by: (1) Providing standards, (2) Creating networks, (3). Establishing processes in information science, and (4) Establishing and following editorial processes. FIZ CHEMIE Berlin is a non-profit company whose partners are the federal government.

SB: Which organizations and individuals are the main users of your products?

RD: Our products service a large number of customers in research, industry and in the teaching process. We are servicing large research networks as well as practically all major companies of the chemical industry. We advise governments and governmental bodies. This advice is given nationally as well as internationally and, with our very large e-learning systems, we supply all German schools, Universities and the industry with high quality teaching material. Just within the teaching area we had in 2009 nearly six million single users. Therefore it is very difficult to pinpoint individuals or organizations.

SB: Could you tell us something about your personal life and interests? What made you switch from electrochemistry to chemical information? What do you do outside of your professional work?

RD: During my study times I collected degrees as other people are collecting stamps and this happened in a variety of subject areas such as chemical engineering, physical chemistry, electrochemistry and corrosion engineering. Only within chemical information could I combine all those areas. What do I do outside my professional work? I play the guitar, classic and modern blues. I am a member of the Magic Circle in Berlin, and an associate of the Magic Club in Nice. Being a magician is very helpful—if I can't solve a problem the normal way, I have always something to fall back on. I also love to cook, and I am producing ancient ship models.

SB: Several years ago, I attended the First German Conference on Cheminformatics, which took place in the beautiful town of Goslar. The audience at the conference was mainly German, with a few foreign participants. I enjoyed very much both the conference and the social program, but I was struck to see so few women there. If I remember it correctly, there were 125 attendees, and I could count no more than 10 women. I have attended many conferences in Europe and the United States (not only in chemical information, but also, as a lab-bench researcher, conferences in such fields as chemistry of natural products, biochemistry, microbiology, and molecular biology), but I have never seen such a small percentage of women at any conference that I have ever attended. Is the field of Chemical Information mostly male-dominated, or this is typical of other areas of science in Germany?

RD: If you would come to Goslar now, you will find that it is still a nice town; the conference is still very interesting and it became fully international, doubling in size. You will find that there are many more women now than there were in the first Goslar conference. I do not think that we have a gender problem in the sciences. But in the past there were by far more male than female students in the sciences. Luckily, this changed dramatically and now we have nearly an equal percentage of male and female students. Coming back to the area of Cheminformatics, you will find that this is still a specialized area and that it is taught at only very few German universities. It is, indeed, still male-dominated, but in recent years the number of women is increasing.

SB: In the academic institutions in Germany, what is the role that librarians play in supporting research and education? What is the status of librarians in these institutions? What education is required for such positions? What does a generic job description for a chemistry librarian in a German academic institution look like?

RD: There is quite a difference in the position of an American librarian and a German librarian. In Germany, the librarian has still a very traditional role. They are the ones to whom you go only to get information. Unfortunately, the librarian is seldom in the position of partner to the researcher. This is unfortunate because in most cases, the librarians have to have an academic degree in librarianship to work in a scientific library. Only very rarely do scientists decide to go into a career as a librarian. I think that one of the problems that we have to cope with is that universities depend on reputation, and reputation depends on research; librarians in Germany are not part of the research process. Therefore, the librarians do not have their true position within this framework. In recent years, this very traditional positioning of the librarian is weakening a bit, but it will still take many years before the librarian is accepted as a valued partner for the scientist.

SB: Many chemistry resources require a steep learning curve. In the United States, chemistry librarians do a lot of instructional classes for end users. How is the training of researchers and students organized in Germany?

RD: The librarian in Germany is highly educated but only very seldom introduced into the education process, especially not in the sciences. Very few universities have courses on teaching the use of information systems that are actually led by a librarian. It is very sad that, within the educational system in Germany, the true value of the librarian is underestimated, and because of this librarians are not used to their full potential. The training of researchers and students is organized by the research professionals within the framework of their department. Lectures are also given by scientific assistants and professors. This is true for both regular universities and universities in the applied sciences.

SB: Are there any specific cheminformatics areas that are predominant in Germany? Which are the institutions in Germany where research in this field is done? Where do researchers in this area publish their papers?

RD: The centers of cheminformatics in Germany have changed. In the past it was always the University of Erlangen that played this role. Now, the universities of Bonn and Hamburg are also strong in this field. Cheminformatics is still pretty small compared to Bioinformatics. The researchers mainly publish in the ACS' Journal of Chemical Information and Modeling, as well as in the Journal of Cheminformatics.

SB: FIZ CHEMIE has been very generous in its support for the ACS Chemical Information Division (CINF), in general, and the Chemical Information Bulletin (CIB), in particular, and we are very grateful for this support. What is the relationship between the German Chemical Society (GDCh) and ACS and between the Chemistry Information Center in Germany and CINF? What are the main past and current initiatives and what are the plans for the future?

RD: There are many consultations and close relations between the ACS and the GDCh. One example of this cooperation is the formation of a working group between the divisions of Computer in Chemistry (CIC) of the GDCh and CINF of the ACS. The task of this working group is the development of a repository of teaching materials for chemical information. The content will be provided by the major universities of both countries and will be open access. The first version of this repository will be launched within this year. This kind of interdivisional working group will be extended into other areas.

SB: In the late eighties, while attending a molecular biology conference in the Harz Mountains, I had the opportunity to visit East Berlin. Two years ago I went back to Berlin for a conference on scientometrics and was thrilled by the new spirit and the infectious mood of the city. One evening, while crossing a bridge on the Spree River, I saw people dancing on a boat. What happened in Berlin after the reunification that it now competes with Paris in atmosphere and liveliness? How did the unification of Germany affect you personally and professionally? What was its impact on the chemical information field?

RD: Berlin developed into a very young city, as after the reunification many artists and young people moved there. It came to a total remake of a capital. Practically all famous architects took part in building new city centers and exploring ways to redesign and rebuild the old and ancient parts of this very large city. If Berlin is having a party (and there are many of these during a year), it is expected that at least one million people will attend. When this drops under 700,000, it will be seen as too small and will be dropped. I moved to Berlin just after the reunification and experienced the tremendous spirit which was developing here. The merger of two completely different cultures and the renewal of a totally run down system is something that can only be experienced and would be very difficult to explain. What we had was a real revolution, but no one was dead and nobody was hurt (at least, not physically). West Germany became more East and East Germany became West, with all the problems and difficulties which are inherent to such a process. The impact which this had on the field of chemical information was that we were able to employ many new and experienced scientists, who came to us with a different background and with new and different ideas. Also, new and different collections of data were found. They are normally hidden in the treasure chests of the chemical industry, like our now large collections of thermodynamic data. More than 25% of our staff are from former East Germany and are highly respected for their knowledge, their achievements, their work, and their humanity. In the sciences we are already united. As far as the society as a whole is concerned, there is still some work to be done.

SB: René, thank you for sharing with us your interesting perspective on cheminformatics in Germany.