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Interview by Ute Deichmann with Prof. Uzy Smilansky, Prof. Emeritus of Physics,

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UD: You completed your PhD in physics with a thesis in nuclear physics with Prof. Gvirol Goldring at the Weizmann Institute in 1969 and then spent almost two years as post-doctoral fellow at the MPI for Nuclear Physics in HD. I would be very interested to learn more about the background: How did your contact with the Heidelberg Institute come about and why were you interested to go there?

US: I was the first physicist of the Weizmann Institute to visit Heidelberg. It was scientific interest, which brought me there; my work overlapped with that of a young physicist at the MPI in Heidelberg, Dirk Schwalm (who much later became the head of the Minerva Fellowships Committee, of which I was a member for approx 19 years). Dirk and I were writing our doctoral theses on a similar topic. The physicist Peter Wurm from Heidelberg, who visited the Weizmann Institute in 1968, connected me with Dirk, and he suggested that I go to Heidelberg. So I went there in 1968 for three months, probably funded by the VW Foundation. Here I met Hans Weidenmueller for the first time, our friendship lasts till this very day. Gentner was happy that I came to Heidelberg.

Then I was married to my first wife who was also a physicist. We wanted to go for a post-doctorate in the US, but it did not work out. At this point it was suggested that I'll go for a Post Doc in Heidelberg. In 1969 I was invited to lecture in a conference organized in Gentner's Institute, where de-Shalit was one of the main speakers. On this occasion Gentner promised to help finding a position for my wife (which he did).

I made most of the contacts through Shalheveth Freier who was at the time assisting de-Shalit on various matters. Shalheveth was a remarkable person. He was son of a rabbi in Berlin. Shalheveth's mother organized, during the 1930s, the rescue transfer of the Jewish youth from Germany. Freier studied at a prestigious high-school in Berlin. When the Nazis came to power, he was expelled from school early on, because when the pupils had to write an essay: "Why am I proud of my people", he wrote about his proud of being Jewish. He was sent to England, where he later volunteered to join the British Army. Then he came to Palestine, where he was active, among other things, in the Haganah. Though he was interested in physics, he did not study, because he was always involved in various important activities. Later he also became head of the Israeli Atomic Energy Commission.

In the 1960s Freier was a special assistant to Amos de Shalit; he was also a friend of Joseph Cohn. Freier always developed his activities behind the front. Under de Shalit he took care of the connections to Germany. He was a very cultured man; the more I knew him, the more I knew how little I knew him. He helped me to prepare the stay in Germany. I told him that I would go on condition that if I find my stay in Germany unbearable I can leave anytime without apology. He understood the practical side of it and assured that I became a member of the academic staff, though I had not been a member before.

UD: Why were Freier, who had made the terrible personal experiences, and Amos de Shalit so devoted in bringing about the scientific collaboration with Germany?

US: Neither Amos nor Shaleheveth tried to blur or eliminate the memory of the past, this was clear to everyone. On the other hand, both recognized the ever increasing importance of Germany as a part of Europe, and Israel should have strong ties to Europe, not only to the US. Amos was a visionary, a thinker, and he had constant discussions with Ben-Gurion. Shalheveth was interested in furthering mutual understanding among people in general, (Both Amos and

Shalheveth were active in the Israeli Pugwash group, Shalheveth headed the group after Amos' death).

UD: Concerning nuclear physics, Israel had already good connections to France, and German science was still quite weak. Why was Germany so important?

US: The good relations with France changed in the late 1960s. At the time Germany was building up its science. In nuclear physics there were centers in Heidelberg with scientists like Jensen and Weidenmueller, then Karlsruhe, Frankfurt, Bonn and Munich and other. It was clear that the German science would go forward. It was also the peak of the economic miracle and Germany was investing in rebuilding its scientific strength.

UD: According to some of your German colleagues the approaches in nuclear physics in Heidelberg and Rehovot were different: The mathematization in Rehovot was much higher; a scientist of the stature of Jensen was a great physicist but not very good in mathematics. Do you agree?

US: We cannot say in a clear way that the Israelis brought about a major improvement to German science. It was a true collaboration, in which both sides benefitted scientifically. In a broad context I do not think that Israeli science was better than German science at the time. Definitely American science was better than each of them. True, at that time the level of German professors was sometimes not so good because they had to fill up so many positions at the same time.

UD: And there were no Jewish scientists any more.

US: I think that the main purpose of Minerva was to bring reconciliation between the German and the Israeli sciences, where both sides contributed more or less equally. I have the impression that Gentner, who was the initiator at the German side, did not get due recognition in Germany. Perhaps he was not considered a German patriot because of his work in France during WWII. Members of the MPI in Heidelberg told me that the MPI authorities did not allow that his bust

will be displayed in the Institute on the ground that this is only possible for Nobel laureates; that is why a book was published on the occasion of his 100th anniversary. On this occasion, too, a plaque commemorating Gentner and his contributions to bringing about the Israeli-German collaboration in the sciences, was erected in front of the physics building at the Weizmann.

UD: You already mentioned the purpose of Minerva; you also wrote, together with Hans Weidenmueller, a chapter on the impact of the Minerva program in the sciences and humanities for the book about Gentner. How would you assess the importance of this program today?

US: I am proud of having contributed to the program. It brought together people on the personal, eye-to-eye level. Once it started, it took around five years only until it became a huge success.

UD: Don't you think, it was too early, too painful for many, to start the collaboration with Germany?

US: Post-factum it was a success. That means it was not too early. At the time it was very difficult. It could have gone wrong if not for Gentner and de Shalit. They hand-picked the right people; and Amos went from door to door in order to ask whether there was any objection in the lab to accommodating a young German visitor.