

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

HENRIQUE P. VON GERSDORFF

The Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences

Transcript of an Interview
Conducted by

Robin Mejia

at

The Vollum Institute, Oregon Health & Science University
Portland, Oregon

on

8, 9, and 10 February 2006

From the Original Collection of the University of California, Los Angeles



Henrique P. von Gersdorff

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Education

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ABSTRACT

Enrique P. von Gersdorff was born in Brazil, the son of a German father and Brazilian mother who had met in Angola. His father worked for the United Nations, so he and his family moved several times from one country to another, mostly in Africa, but also into Lebanon. When von Gersdorff was twelve his family moved back to Brazil. He attended American schools throughout these moves, so he learned English from an early age, though he spoke Portuguese at home. He attended an American high school until his last year, when he switched to a Brazilian one in order to prepare for the national graduation examination. He liked mathematics and resolved early to be a theoretical physicist. He also liked taking things apart to see how they worked.

Von Gersdorff matriculated into the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, spending a year studying engineering before switching to physics. He then pursued a master's degree in theoretical physics at Centro Brasileiro de Pesquisas Fisicas (Brazilian Center for Physical Science) in Rio de Janeiro. From Brazil he moved to Batavia, Illinois, where he accepted a position at the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory, working with Larry McLerran. He returned to theoretical physics by entering a PhD program in Joseph Kapusta's laboratory at the University of Minnesota. Finishing in four years, he accepted a postdoctoral fellowship in high-energy nuclear physics at Brookhaven National Laboratory in Long Island, New York.

He grew less satisfied with physics and found himself intrigued by the brain's workings. He took a summer course in electrophysiology taught by Gail Mandel, a professor at the State University of New York, Stony Brook, and loved it. He entered Gary Matthews's neurophysiology laboratory at Stony Brook and earned a PhD in neurobiology. He met and married his wife in Long Island. He then took a second postdoctoral fellowship with Erwin Neher in Germany, where he began his current research in sensory neuroscience using electrophysiology to study synapses in the retina and the auditory brainstem. Neher encouraged him to go to Japan to work with the lab's main competitor for two months; this work resulted in a collaborative paper in *Neuron*.

Von Gersdorff accepted an offer from the Vollum Institute in Portland, Oregon. He discusses the setting-up of his lab; his funding; the make-up of his lab; writing grants; and the impact of the Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences award on his work. His wife's career, which was in hiatus while their two children were still young, was in teaching languages.

Von Gersdorff returns the focus of the interview to his laboratory: his role there; more about his start-up package; his management and mentoring style; and writing journal articles. He discusses his travel commitments and his teaching and administrative duties; he explains his positions at the Vollum Institute and Oregon Health & Science University and how promotion works; he talks about collaboration in science, especially international collaboration; he describes a typical workday; and he discusses the issue of patents. The interview ends with an explanation of the wider context of von Gersdorff's work, potential practical applications of his research, and the direction of his future research.

UCLA INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWER:

Robin Mejia, Interviewer, UCLA Oral History Program; B.A., Biology, University of California, Santa Cruz, 1997.

TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

Place: Henrique von Gersdorff's office at the Vollum Institute

Date: February 8, 9, and 10, 2006

Total number of recorded hours: 4.5

Persons present during interview: Mejia and von Gersdorff.

CONDUCT OF INTERVIEW:

This interview is one in a series with Pew Scholars in the Biomedical Sciences conducted by the UCLA Oral History Program in conjunction with the Pew Charitable Trusts' Pew Scholars in the Biomedical Sciences Oral History and Archives Project. The project has been designed to document the backgrounds, education, and research of biomedical scientists awarded four-year Pew scholarships since 1988.

To provide an overall framework for project interviews, the director of the UCLA Oral History Program and three UCLA faculty project consultants developed a topic outline. In preparing for this interview, Mejia corresponded with von Gersdorff by email and talked by phone to obtain background material, including von Gersdorff's CV, and scheduled the interview. Mejia also obtained and read copies of von Gersdorff's published articles, reviewed descriptions of his work on his website, and reviewed background information on the institutions at which he has worked and the countries in which he has lived.

ORIGINAL EDITING

Carol Squires edited the interview. She edited for punctuation, paragraphing, and spelling, and verified proper names. Words and phrases inserted by the editor have been bracketed.

Von Gersdorff did not review the transcript. Consequently, some proper names and other information remain unverified.

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