Professor Siegfried Blechert

A Tribute



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Siegfried Blechert was born on March 1st, 1946 in a displacement camp in Aalborg in northern Denmark. After the return of his family to Germany in 1947, he grew up in Hanover. The present of a chemistry set from his chemistry teacher at the age of 12 allowed him to carry out advanced experiments and his decision to become a chemist was made soon after the smoke of the first successful experiments had settled. Due to his school education, he initially aimed to become a lab technician, but was convinced by his teachers to attend the high school. After obtaining the "Abitur" and the unavoidable military service, Siegfried Blechert studied chemistry at the University of Hanover. Only four years later he started at the same place with his PhD work in the research group of Prof. Ekkehard Winterfeldt, where he investigated and synthesized metabolites of the anticancer alkaloid acronycine. His PhD thesis was completed in 1974 and Siegfried Blechert was almost on his way to join a chemical company, when Prof. Winterfeldt offered him a position as a postdoctoral research fellow. Some years later Siegfried Blechert started his independent research work in Hanover. Together with his wife Heidemarie, whom he married in 1973, and two children he moved in 1981 to a postdoctoral position in Gif-sur-Yvette with Prof. Pierre Potier. Being a dedicated camper, the family initially lived on a camping site close to the institute. The isolation of baccatin III from yew trees and the first investigations

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towards the total synthesis of taxotere – nowadays a widely used anticancer drug – were performed in Potier's group and encouraged his interest in natural product synthesis. After returning to Hanover one year later, Siegfried Blechert completed his "Habilitation" in 1983 with a variety of novel reactions summarized as 'Rearrangements with nitrogen-oxygen bond cleavage'. Two years later he received calls from the Universities of Münster and Bonn and in 1985, now with three children, he moved to Bonn as an Associate Professor (C3). He continued playing football at least during various matches against other research groups at the Chemistry Institute. His research group grew quickly and many different research projects based on novel strategies towards terpenes and alkaloids were developed. His interest in domino-sequences for the efficient and fast construction of complex systems were often based on reactions developed during his work in Hanover. Also interest in biological effects of compounds synthesized during the project of the total synthesis of taxol, led to some research collaborations. His research in metal-catalyzed rearrangements of double bonds, the metathesis reaction, was inititated in the late eighties in Bonn. In 1989/90 he received calls for a full professorship (C4) from the Universities of Wuppertal, Paderborn, Ulm and from the Technical University of Berlin. Still with three children, but now with many more diploma and PhD students, he moved to the Technical University of Berlin in October 1990, just one year after Germany's reunification.

The reconstruction of the Chemistry Institute at the Technical University of Berlin had already started when Siegfried Blechert,s group arrived in Berlin, but it was several more years before the group could finally move into completely new laboratories. This, however, had only a small impact on the research as the areas were considerably widened after arrival in Berlin. The first student working on the metathesis reaction had already started in Bonn and Blechert is surely one of the academic pioneers investigating the potential and scope of this reaction with – at that time – very labile catalysts. Many more co-workers made a huge impact in this area by developing novel approaches to a series of different natural products. Not only the application of the metathesis reaction, but also the development of novel catalysts for these transformations were pursued by Blechert and his co-workers. His success in chemistry is accompanied by constant invitations to lectures, conferences and company visits all over the world. In 2000 he received the offer of a full professorship at the Technical University of Vienna, which he declined. Many invitations to named lectureships and a visiting professorship at the University of Paris V in 2004 allowed him to describe the many facets of his research to various audiences. In 2006 he became a member of the 'Deutsche Akademie der Naturforscher Leopoldina' and also served his University and the scientific community in various capacities. When reading his publications it is obvious that the main focus of his 230 papers and patents is quality rather than quantity.

I enjoyed very much being a part of his research group for what now seems to have been only a short time. I had a great deal of freedom for research during this time and it was a very intense experience. Blechert's never ending enthusiasm for research and chemistry has not only influenced me, but surely has also enlightened many of his about 200 PhD students and postdocs who had a similar experience - and all of whom congratulate him on his upcoming 65th birthday.

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Thomas Wirth, Cardiff University

Selected Publications of Professor Siegfried Blechert

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