

New voices displace east/west tensions

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The east German city of Magdeburg, long known for its neuroscience research, went through a difficult period in the years after the Berlin Wall came down. But its scientific efforts received a boost last week with the opening of the Centre for Neuroscience Innovation and Technology.

[MAGDEBURG] Magdeburg, the east Germany city now famous for its high level of unemployment, last week celebrated the opening of a technology transfer centre that marks the success of post-reunification efforts to build a strong base in the neurosciences.

The Centre for Neuroscience Innovation and Technology (ZENIT) is on the university campus of a city that is still coming to terms with the cultural shock of the country's reunification. It was described by Hannelore Kohl, wife of the German chancellor, who opened the centre, as "an excellent example of how the scientific infrastructure has been successfully established in the new German *Länder* [states]."

ZENIT was built with the support of European Union structural funds, intended to stimulate the economies of poorer regions of Europe. It will complement a group of neuroscience research departments in the Institute for Neurobiology (IfN) and the Otto von Guericke University of Magdeburg.

Half of ZENIT's 5,000 square metres will be occupied by university neuroscience and medical technology departments. Five start-up companies spun off from the university and IfN are moving into the other half, where they will be joined by the new Max Planck Institute for the Dynamics of Complex Sys-

tems, and a state-of-the-art magnetic resonance imaging machine.

Magdeburg established a tradition in neurosciences during the communist era. Its Institute for Brain Research, the last institute to be founded (in 1985) by the East German Academy of Sciences, had an international reputation. In 1990 the Wissenschaftsrat, the science council of the federal republic, recommended that it continue to operate.

Two years later, a second Wissenschaftsrat committee recommended that the new university should focus its efforts on neuroscience. But the years immediately after the *Wende*—the political changes following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989—have been difficult for east German academics.

Well over half of the professors lost their jobs. Some were suspected of having links with the Stasi, the East German secret police. Others were unwilling or unable to reapply successfully for their posts, as the government required.

In 1992, the Institute for Brain Research was reconstituted as the IfN, and re-hired only one of its seven research directors, Klaus Reymann. A year later the university was founded, merging Magdeburg's prestigious Medical Academy with other higher education institutes.

Of 15 new university chairs created in the neurosciences, most were filled by west Germans. Many professors left the Medical Academy to set up in private practice before their chairs were advertised as university positions, and others had their academic positions downgraded.

Five years later, the east German academics who survived this upheaval say they prefer the new, well-financed system, enjoying the freedom to travel and the efficiency of well-equipped laboratories.

But resentment lingers among many of those who lost their posts. Wolfram Neumann, an east German who is now dean of medicine at the university, says that, at first, doctors whose links with the university were cut refused to refer patients to university clinics. "But things are much better now."

The west Germans who moved to Magdeburg are also getting used to the poorer living conditions (now starting to improve) and an unfamiliar culture, factors that initially put off many scientists from moving east.

One who was not put off is Henning Scheich, who, at the age of 50, left a safe chair at the University of Darmstadt to head the IfN. He saw a unique opportunity to create a systems-based neuroscience institute with research activities at molecular, behavioural and clinical levels. His first "very unpleasant" task was to oversee the dismissal of many staff. "It was also difficult to encourage those scientists who remained to be creative," he says.

To "change the spirit", he brought in a small army of "young, self-confident west German graduate students". The IfN's 30 or 40 PhD positions are now filled by students from both west and east. Unlike their older colleagues, these young scientists are at ease working and socializing with each other.

For the older generation, the issue of west versus east will never disappear. Three years ago, for example, Reymann, an internationally acknowledged expert in the molecular mechanisms of learning, was dismissed from his post as an IfN research director after the Sachsen-Anhalt Ministry of Culture discovered a file allegedly linking him with activities helpful to the Stasi. "I started to travel to the west in 1986, and so I inevitably had to have contact with the Stasi," says Reymann.

Scheich ensured that the IfN kept Reymann on as a researcher using non-government grants. Reymann has now formed a neurosciences service company with other colleagues which is moving into ZENIT.

In doing so, Reymann joins an effort in Magdeburg—and in the whole of Germany—to harvest the results of academic research for industrial and social needs. Ironically, says Bernhard Sabel, head of the university's Institute for Medical Psychology and chairman of ZENIT's scientific council, this is something that universities in the communist east were much better at than their west German counterparts. □



The University of Magdeburg was named after Otto von Guericke, inventor of the air pump, who in 1658 demonstrated the force of atmospheric pressure. In an experiment that is regularly reconstructed (above), he used his air pump to create a vacuum between two hemispheres which could then not be pulled apart by 16 cart-horses. The hemispheres are incorporated into the logos of both the university and the Institute for Neurobiology, symbolizing to some the unification of West and East Germany.