GRADUATE JOURNAL

A lab affair

I did not expect to find myself in this kind of relationship. We met when the new arrival moved into a lab upstairs. It was difficult for us to communicate at first, but after spending a week together, I returned to my lab with a deeper understanding of the possibilities and pitfalls ahead of us.

My new labmate and close companion, a powder diffractometer, would take me to new heights in identifying and characterizing powdered crystalline material. On making this instrument's acquaintance, my last mechanical flame, an older model from the geology department, faded into distant memory.

Could it be a sense of possessiveness that rises in me when another student asks to use it? How is it that I feel guilty when I forget to run a weekly calibration? Why would anger flash when others fail to clean up when their run is over?

I can't help but anthropomorphize this bucket of bolts. Too many joys, sorrows and blank stares have been shared. Too many troubles were overcome and diaries written about our relationship not to admit that I am close to, and will certainly miss, my diffractometer when I go. Without getting to know this analytical tool, generating the new insights into my material on the Ångstrom scale would not have been possible. ■

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BRICKS & MORTAR

Switzerland switches on supercomputers

Last month, a supercomputing centre devoted solely to bioinformatics came online in Switzerland. Based at the Swiss Institute of Bioinformatics in Lausanne, Vital-IT can process 450 billion calculations per second and should provide a welcome boost to the country's proteomics capabilities.

As well as raising Switzerland's profile in the world of bioinformatics, Vital-IT will create several research jobs and will help to foster innovation. The centre is a collaboration between the bioinformatics institute, the computing firms Hewlett Packard and Intel, and five other academic institutions: the Ludwig Institute for Cancer Research, the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (EPFL) in Lausanne, and the universities of Lausanne, Geneva and Basel. All of the partners will benefit from having access to the new facility. The EPFL, for example, is setting up two research groups in bioinformatics that will be committed to the centre.

The Swiss government this year doubled the budget of the Swiss Institute of Bioinformatics to SFr6 million (US$4.6 million) a year starting in 2004; the institute will have received a total of SFr27 million by 2007. About half of that money will go towards paying for protein annotation, the labour-intensive process of determining each protein's function and classifying them by family. The budget hike has allowed Vital-IT to hire five staff this year and may provide for more positions next year, says Victor Jongeneel, the centre's director.

Hewlett Packard and Intel got involved in Vital-IT primarily as a means of testing new technologies and as a way to get into the potentially lucrative bioinformatics market. Their efforts seem to be paying off: the centre is already attracting talented computer scientists to tweak old bioinformatics software to run on the new hardware (see *Nature Biotechnol.* **22,** 492–493; 2004). The two companies, which are funding one position each at the centre, are also building their own in-house bioinformatics teams, says Jongeneel, who adds that all academic partners in the project intend to grow their research capacity over the next few years.

But, perhaps most importantly, the launch of the centre should attract more collaborators who are interested in applying new computational techniques to protein analysis. ■

Paul Smaglik is editor of *Naturejobs*.

www.isb-sib.ch/projects/vitalit.htm

MOVERS

Norbert Jousten, executive director, International Science and Technology Center, Moscow

With his affinity for eastern Europe, his diplomatic abilities and his solid background in nuclear technology, Norbert Jousten feels prepared for his new post as executive director of the International Science and Technology Center (ISTC) in Moscow.

Jousten is used to change. In December 2000, he was a diplomat for the European Commission in the Ukranian city of Kiev when the government there submitted to the will of the international community and closed the last nuclear reactor at Chernobyl. "It was a fascinating time," he remembers. "You could feel the tremendous changes going on and the great desire of the people to come closer to Europe."

Now the 57-year-old Belgian is preparing to help bring about further changes in the eastern bloc. The ISTC helps to make peaceful use of the legacy of the former Soviet Union's nuclear programme. The end of the cold war left many highly trained weapons experts without a job. Since 1994, the ISTC has been scouring their home countries in an attempt to find them civilian research jobs.

Jousten, who studied nuclear physics in Liège, Belgium, before beginning his career in nuclear technology and, later, diplomacy, is optimistic about the prospects of success in his newest mission. So far, he notes, fears that former Soviet weapons scientists could be tempted to offer classified knowledge to 'undesirable' paymasters have proved unfounded — at least, in most cases. Jousten hopes that, as Russia's economic situation stabilizes, the ISTC's attempts to redirect military know-how into socially beneficial activities will continue to prevent scientists from defecting. "There are many newly emerging opportunities for military researchers," he says.

Currently, Jousten is living without his wife and family in a Moscow hotel, where he is trying to improve his Russian. "Not an easy task," he admits. "But Moscow is such an incredibly fast-developing city, I really like working here." By the end of October, when the ISTC will celebrate its tenth anniversary with a big conference, Jousten hopes that the search for a flat will be over, his Russian will be good enough to order dinner, and his family will be reunited. ■

CV

1996–2004: Head of European Commission delegation to Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova in Kiev, Ukraine
1992–96: Head of Regional Cooperation and Nuclear Safety unit at the European Commission
1988–92: European Union representative at the International Atomic Energy Agency, Vienna, Austria
1980–88: Safety inspector, EURATOM, Brussels, Belgium
1975–79: Nuclear automation engineer, Westinghouse, Belgium
1970–75: Nuclear power plant engineer, Siemens, Erlangen, Germany