

Oral History: Emerald Perlas / 2017/01/26

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File name: 2017_01_26 EMERALD PERLAS TRANSCRIPT

Key

AFL: = Interviewer, Anne-Flore Laloë

EP: = Participant, Emerald Perlas

[??? at XX:XX] = inaudible word or section at this time

AFL: So we're at EMBL Monterotondo today, I am Anne-Flore Laloë, the Archivist at the European Molecular Biology Laboratory and please would you introduce yourself?

EP: Yeah, I'm Emerald Perlas and I've been here in Monterotondo since 1999 when there were probably like two groups only and now I'm here, still here, 2017. It's been a nice run of work, met a lot of people. Anyway, before coming to EMBL I came from California, I used to work at Stanford University. I was a laboratory manager in a reproductive biology lab up until I met an Italian Post Doc, who sort of like convinced me that life in Italy was nice. So I tried it, I came in 1997 and then got married to this Italian Post Doc, got a kid, my daughter was born the year after. Before coming to EMBL I was promised it was at a pharmaceutical company, Italian pharmaceutical company, which was actually funded by the Catholic Church. It was a very nice laboratory, they were dealing with skin transplants for burn victims and some other skin problems. But the only thing there was that I never actually did anything on my own, I was just being told to do certain things, come in on weekends, when actually the whole point of coming on weekends was to just you know, for a short time, but seriously I don't think I needed to come during the

weekends, but it was more like just “You need to come.” So I was getting a lot of overtime pay for you know, not really complaining about the money I’m getting but it was just bothersome that I needed to do something else, it was not really me. So after a while it got to me and you know, so like adjusting to the Italian life, and so I wanted to call out and my wife says “Wait, wait, before you give up, let me find you something else.” So a friend of a friend says “Well you know they’ve been trying to open up a place, an international research lab in Monterotondo.” And they said you know, give it a try, they might need you. And so I sent in my CV to the Director at the time, Klaus and he said “Well come in, I’ll talk to you and let’s see what we can do.” And so I came and I talked and I saw that the place was just starting up. It was nice, people were really, really friendly, so everybody was there to actually greet you, to welcome you, to be part of this place that’s just like starting. Even Klaus was very nice, seriously if I’d known that he was a big, big, big scientist I wouldn’t have been very comfortable with the interview but luckily I didn’t, so I was more comfortable talking to him and what I thought about the place, what I thought I could contribute to the place. So it turned out well, a couple of weeks later he called me and said to come in for a second interview and “let’s see if you really want to come and work for us.” And I said you know, why not, I’m talking to people who can talk in English [Laughs] you know, and may actually get to work, do the things I’m trained for. <5:00> And so I came and initially I was working with the Spanish group leader, who also was just starting out, his name is Jose Luis de la Pompa and so he says “Well you know, we would like you to do histology and I’d done some histology before in the States but it was not very extensive. So he said “You need to work with embryos, mouse embryos, so let me see how it turns out. And the technician at that time [??? at 05:45] I think that’s

her name, by the way she's the friend of a friend my wife had contacted, so she showed me and it didn't look like very challenging enough to stop me from saying maybe I cannot do it. So I said well you know, it looks simple enough, so I did it. But the point was that so Luis was at that time I thought was – might have also been looking around, which we didn't know at the time, so he says you know, this is what you need to do, certain histological procedures, he would you know, show me bits and pieces of it but the main point was that he sort of like just let me loose and you know, "Try out this protocol and see how it works out for you and if you have problems, come back." I wasn't really used to that kind of approach, but I thought it actually was very nice. For me, again not knowing that he was actually planning on moving away, for me it worked out nicely because I had the freedom to make really huge mistakes without anybody knowing about it. [Laughs] But at the same time I learn a lot. When I finally got things to work and you know, I showed it to him and he says "Well you know, good, so I told you the protocol works." And I said "Yeah, okay. It took me a little while to work it out but it's fine." And anyway so he left and I was sort of like left on my own not knowing what's next. I'm supposed to be the histologist but you know, since nobody was working with embryos anymore because he was the one who was actually working with early embryos, so I just like talk to people and the nice thing again, it was such a small group and again maybe I'm like romanticising this times but I think the small group that started here was actually close knitted. You can walk into the office of a group leader, including Klaus Rajewsky when he was around, and talk to him. And I guess emails were not trendy at that time yet, so you'd actually see people that you communicate with and you know, not having to send like emails when the person is next door. So it was pretty nice, people were running samples for other people

just because they had too more spots in their gel and sometimes I guess it got on the nerves of some group leaders because they're not getting the authority that they should have, that why would somebody walk in without you know, setting up an appointment, I'm not here to – I have things to do, papers to write, I have grants to apply for and somebody walks in and sits and says “You know, my experiment didn't work. What can you tell me about it?” And yeah I've heard stories about that. Most of the time <10:00> it was from Walter Witke he was doing sort of like the Deputy Director at the time, group leader / computer fixer, you know, whatever... So he was doing everything that needed to be done. He was fixing instruments, a lot of things. But then again everybody was doing a lot more things than they were hired for, so that was really the fun thing about that group, was that you're not there to do just one thing, you're there to make this place work. Again I mean maybe this was just you know, my impression but I really thought it was the way it worked before. People would go for outings and it comes natural, it was not like a very forced outing that you had to go, even if you were not part of the group, you'd go, join in, because it was a group of foreigners out of their country trying to be – trying to survive Italy early years, and a lot of Italian members at EMBL also helped a lot by making them feel like it's not against you, it's just the way things are. So you don't have to take it personally. And after a while I think most people sort of like understood that and again so eventually I think we were getting to more science. I think a lot of the people who first got here were very excited, very nice, but then to a certain point after some time they really needed to do science, they were hungry to get their hands on something that they were curious about, not setting up something or going to a place, helping somebody move into another place. So it was again after a while science actually started. And that

also was very nice because of the people from CNR, who maybe were not really sure how long we were going to stay, but then at the same time were very curious about these foreigners who were here, almost like to ask very arrogant, to say “we would need a centrifuge, give us a centrifuge.” And they would like run around and say “What do you need the centrifuge for?” And then – but they were very accommodating, again and they were very – we made fun of each other, our Christmas parties, you would do a spoof on a member of the – one side they would do the same towards EMBL, so it was very again relaxed and nice. Over the years people have come, group leaders, exciting times again, very ambitious group leaders would come and along with that they’d bring in speakers and again the whole point I think at least for me was that you’re getting to hear science and that was what I think drove everybody to stay around and really appreciate what you were building here in Monterotondo, because now you’re just not trying to see if something works, you’re actually doing something that was a routine or a normality in a science lab. <15:00> Hearing outside speakers, hearing seminars from our colleagues, so it was becoming more like a real institute and again the more people that came in, the more to some point it was getting an extended family. We were growing, we were becoming very productive scientifically. There were some points where there was some crisis about again not knowing how long EMBL was supposed to stay, just because there were rumours going around, I don’t know where the rumours would come from, but then it propagated like wildfire and then again when you hear something like this, when you hear that there’s no security on how long or how – what the future holds for you, then I think people forget about science, forget about – [Laughs] and they’re like trying to see how they can jump ship. But again fortunately things were cleared and

again after some point it actually grew to a point where we were getting a lot of post doc students and then to a certain point I think we got Nadia around 2000/2001 I think, to come. With all her energy she was like you know, looking at things very positively, so everything was super, she was – she came in I think with a Californian mentality, with superlatives, which was nice, because it sort of like held us up and the moral – and said okay this is – she was showing on group leaders to do what they needed to do and things that we needed to take care of with the CNR side she was taking care of with all her charm and so she's handling everything and really avoiding conflicts or minimising little things. So again I thought that she helped a lot with group leaders, post docs and even students with their security, with knowing that they can do their science without having to deal with other things that we were not here for, including politics or other things that maybe was very inconvenient. So Nadia was taking care of all those things and so she brought in a lot of people, she made the diversity of EMBL even more. Her lab itself was very diverse.

AFL: And so what was happening in histology at that time?

EP: With histology, so after being orphaned I was – so like taken – or adopted by [Laughs] Walter and his lab and so he was actually saying you know, you need to concentrate on histology in general. I mean so he got – again he gave me more time and says “what do you think you need to do to have a histology place?” So I said “you know, well I think I need to develop certain other techniques.” And he said “go for it. <20:00> You need to do it, then if you need materials or if you need certain tissues, talk to my people or talk to my lab.” And actually that turned out very nice, at the very beginning, sort of like a collaboration. And at the same time it kept me into being

involved in science, not just like a service, so I was sort of like part of their lab but not part of their lab. I get to attend meetings, contribute to their discussions and again within the realm of histology, which was very nice. And in the end we actually had a lot of good studies that met with – well maybe I'm exaggerating a lot but a number of good papers that came out from that collaboration. So and again with his support I was also doing some things with the other labs, so but I think to some point the other labs might have thought that I was actually working for him. So that sort of was not good to some point, but he made it clear, he told me on several occasions when there were like group meetings, that he was clear to all the other group leaders that I needed to work for the whole institute and not just for him. So if there were any needs from the other labs there shouldn't be any hesitation that they would be taking away some time for the work that I needed to do for him. So that was a very nice arrangement. That went on for a little while. Again even during the time that Nadia came to be director of the place but with our lab so my services was sort of like expanded, because they were doing some other types of research – tissues, the heart muscle, so again I mean personally it was nice because I didn't just work with a particular tissue, which again now in retrospect was actually, helped me a lot to be what I am doing now, because I'm able to handle sort of like every sort of tissue that you can see in a mouse. So it was again different groups, different needs, a lot of people, maybe I'm just getting old but I don't really – I see faces but I can't remember names. That's sort of like embarrassing, but I mean of course I think that happens to everyone, I sometimes even mix up the names of my kids. [Laughs] There's a daughter and a son so I can't really – but in the end I think EMBL has been very nice, again it's a very normal institute in the sense that you get nice people, you get some not so

nice people, but I think in the end it's just how you deal with characters, how you adapt to certain situations that helps. I can say on my side and I'm sure a lot of people can say it on their side, I'm not an easy person to deal with, so it's been nice. <25:00>

AFL: Thank you so much Emerald.

EP: You're welcome.

[End of Recording]