

Oral History: Nelly Van Der Jagt / 2017/01/13

DISCLAIMER

The information contained in this transcript is a textual representation of the recoded interview which took place on 2017/01/13 as part of the Oral Histories programme of the EMBL Archive. It is an unedited, verbatim transcript of this recorded interview. The transcript was prepared to the best of our abilities. Nevertheless, isolated errors cannot be completely excluded. In case of doubt, please always refer to the audio file.

The transcript may not be copied or disseminated to anyone unless permission is obtained from the EMBL.

Some information contained herein may be work product of the interviewee and/or private conversation among participants. The views expressed herein are solely those of the interviewee in his private capacity and do not necessarily reflect the views of the EMBL.

EMBL reserves the right not to be responsible for the topicality, accuracy, completeness or quality of the information provided. Liability claims regarding damage caused by the use of any information provided, including any kind of information which is incomplete or incorrect, will therefore be rejected.

File name: 2017_01_13 NELLY VAN DER JAGT TRANSCRIPT

Key

AFL: = Interviewer, Anne-Flore Laloë

NVDJ: = Participant, Nelly van der Jagt

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

AFL: So we're here today, it's Friday 13th January 2017, we're at EMBL Heidelberg in Germany. This interview is part of the Oral Histories Project of the EMBL Archive. My name is Anne-Flore Laloë and I'm the Archivist of the European Molecular Biology Laboratory. Please could you introduce yourself.

NVDJ: My name is Nelly Van Der Jagt. I'm still living in the Heidelberg area, been working at EMBL for many years.

AFL: So could you tell us about your arrival at EMBL?

NVDJ: My arrival at EMBL was ages ago, '75 to be precise. I was hired as a kind of office clerk, there were no precise job descriptions yet at that time. And well we were working altogether in two big offices and a few small ones. There was no building, no food, no transport and we started or I started in the DKFZ in Heidelberg.

AFL: So who first recruited you? Do you remember?

NVDJ: That was Konrad Müller at that time he was Head of Personnel and the other one, the Administrative Director, was Bernard Bach and John Kendrew was the Director General at that time.

AFL: And so you started based at DKFZ. And so what were your first tasks?

NVDJ: Gosh, at that time we were all working for everybody, there was no precise job description. We were distributing mail, we had to type letters at that time still on a typewriter. We were working for finance people, there was personnel. At that time there was one secretary for personnel and one for the Administrative Director and another one for the Director General and a few others, I can't remember how many, two or three, and I was one of the others.

AFL: How big was EMBL back at that time?

NVDJ: Well I was number 47, not many more. [Laughs] Although it was growing very fast.

AFL: Already.

NVDJ: Yes.

AFL: And over your time at EMBL you carried out lots of different tasks? Shall we just talk through –

NVDJ: Yeah we can talk about that. So I first started as a kind of general office clerk in the DKFZ and then I started to work more and more for the council secretariat, so that was preparing documents for council and the finance committee and at that time still in the three different official languages, French, English and German. This was done always on a typewriter and a stencil machine to reproduce and some kind of binding thing or stapling. So nothing else, no more machines, hand work. [Laughs] And the person having this office, there was

only one, had her office or sort of an office, in some containers at the premises of the Max Planck Institut for Kernphysik. So I then started to work more and more over there and that was up the hill because there was no other building yet, and other people were distributed over a few buildings in the City of Heidelberg.

AFL: And so that was the very first time that you were starting to come to campus.

NVDJ: Yes, yeah. It was a construction site so I was taking care of finance committee council meetings, also for SEC reviews.

AFL: That's Scientific Advisory Committee.

NVDJ: Scientific Advisory Committee. Then also we took care of administration meetings, senior scientist meetings and a few other things I must have forgotten at this moment. [Laughs] Ah ja, there was one big task that was the annual scientific report, so I got more and more and more and more – annual report also in three languages, scientific report was always done in English. And I loved my job at that time. Then I left working at the DKFZ, working for finance and purchasing people and I was doing this for about six or seven years, six years maybe? And after that <5:00> I changed to the DG Office, I was under the leadership of Lennart Philipson and he Administrative Director was Jean-François Beerblock so that was two jobs, and because it was so boring I also had a PhD programme, started this with John Tooze at that time. So John was the scientific person, I was the administrator. And to complete the job I had another one and that was organising courses and conferences for a couple of years. The setting up of the courses, conferences in the PhD programme, until the big boss once came and asked me very

politely if he could cross off one of my jobs. [Laughs] Because – I can still remember that, “Are you angry with me?” I can’t remember when it first what that I left to somebody else – course, conferences or PhD, because the administrative director I had no time for him. You had peaks with the PhD programme and the same for course, conferences, so this was growing and growing and growing and then after a while, the second job I got off but the other two I kept with. So administrative director and DG office at that time. And after that I went to – at that time it was still called Bio Computing, and at that time we called it Programme Secretary and after a while it got another name and another name and at the end it was Administrative – now what was it? Unit Secretary was also a name, Programme Administrator. And this I did for at least 20 years, moving from one office to another but yeah, until I retired.

AFL: Until you retired in 2014?

NVDJ: Exactly, that was December 2014.

AFL: Who was – under Bio Computing who was the –

NVDJ: My first boss there was, ah ja that was Chris Sander and together they had a joint coordinatorship with Pat Argos, those two. And then there was Matti Sarastre, then for a while Frank Gannon also was coordinator. And after Matti Sarastre, we had joint coordinatorship because the programme was always very big. We had two parts, the bio computing and the structures, which was then renamed structural – and then it was Peer Bork who was –

AFL: So that’s quite a varied career at EMBL. That’s definitely a lot of evolution and it gives you the ability to see the organisation grow.

NVDJ: Yes.

AFL: So if you could pick out a few of the things that changed the most really, the key moments of your EMBL –

NVDJ: One key moment was certainly the inauguration of the first main building, which is not comparable to the building we have at the moment and I think it was '76. Because before I started DKFZ had some container on the Kernphysik site and then also quite a while we were housed in the nowadays called *Kinderhaus* and it was also only one layer, so it was not as big. We were for quite some time there until '76 I think it was, the inauguration of the main building. So then we finally had a real building, but still no food, so no canteen and no – which was important to me, no operon hall, so no meeting room for the yearly council and finance committee because that was not within the main building. That came years later, so that was still moving everything for the meetings, the two meetings we had. It was always summer so it was always 30 degrees, I can remember and you had to copy all the documents [Laughs] so you needed a few t shirts, no air conditioning. That was one key point and after that the building it was always a construction site, it never stopped until 40 years later when I retired it was still a construction site. Because they are still building or reconstructing. <10:00> [pause] The first open day was also an adventure in the late '70s I think, yes. We had to – well everybody had to work on that. I think it was a Saturday or a Sunday. And we had to guide little groups through the building and it was also – EMBL wasn't very well known at that time yet, it was relatively small. And I can remember – I always like a good joke to people, I had to guide around, I had to get them to the at that time so-called it was a level 4 safety area, I think it doesn't even exist anymore, which

meant that it was – it wasn't called gene expression at that time, but there were very special safety reasons and I couldn't resist to say well "I'll take them now to the little green men in the woods." [Laughs] And everybody asked: "What's that??" There still exists stamps from that day on envelopes in the post office, in '78, late '70s –

AFL: The open day?

NVDJ: That was the first open day. After that there were a few more but that was the first one I still remember, it was very crowded, everybody came to see –

AFL: Because you're also quite unique at EMBL to having worked under the four Directors General.

NVDJ: Yes that's right. So I started off with Sir John Kendrew, then Lennart Philipson, worked for him personally for nine years, the full nine years, he left and then Fotis Kafatos came and then after Fotis, Iain Mattaj.

AFL: Are there specific changes that you noticed over that or - ?

NVDJ: Every new Director General had new ideas and that was one of the reasons we never got bored because then it was all rearranged. Sir John Kendrew, well I didn't work for him personally and he was not so often here, he was also travelling I guess at that time and he kept on with I guess an office in England. The other one, Lennart Philipson, moved here and as I worked for him personally I had to deal with him a lot. He was very active, we were always the first two people in the morning who came and then we had a deal that I can drink his coffee if I make it. [Laughs] Because he said in Sweden of

course, Swedish women or Scandinavian countries they're a little bit more emancipated than here and he said there he had a secretary and she didn't want to make coffee and he said okay let's make a deal, so we had a deal for nine years, it worked good. And he was – well he was a person easy to work with, open doors, everybody ran in and out. You would scream from one office to another if you needed something. The only thing now I would say, he was smoking a lot and I'm a non-smoker, so somehow it worked. If it got too much we closed his door and he was okay this is it.

AFL: It's too much. Wow.

NVDJ: Yeah, for the other two Director Generals I haven't really worked with, there were always changes when a new Director General came, everybody had his own idea of how to organise things.

AFL: You were telling me earlier about how you first needed to commute to EMBL before it was set up with buses and what not.

NVDJ: Ah yeah, no transport.

AFL: Is that a story that you'd happily tell me again?

NVFJ: Of course. I can remember when I started here, it was the first years we had very, very hot summers and so far I wasn't bored because I had to take the bus on plastic leather seats, so I normally had an extra t-shirt in my handbag because the 30 degrees or more the plastic seats in the bus meeting the driver at the main station in Heidelberg and getting up the hill and then working in a container and reproducing documents in 35 degrees or a bit more, yeah. And because <15:00> no public transport up the hill, so it was a bit of a

journey in the morning and a bit of a journey in the afternoon. The positive thing, the working hours it was not manageable to work 8 hours because you could not get here on time and leave. But in those days this was still possible. Then when time went by I decided to buy a car because that was nothing, there was a bus in the morning, by snow then nothing went. Once, I told you this before, it was also possible that we had ice on the street and you couldn't get home. Now the thing, the opposite way I still remember that we had ice in the morning and then you can't go to work, which is of course a bit nicer – [Laughs] the other way round people were sitting here in late, late, late evening and no food and very cold and you couldn't go home. So we were prepared to sleep here, which in the end turned out not to be necessary. Our driver at that time managed to get us some food, some pizza, and very late in the evening we could drive home, we joined forces in somebody's car and then we all went down the hill and somehow we got home. It has changed a lot since then. But only recently and only recently regarding 40 years is five, six, seven year ago, we got more buses or we got a bus to the EMBL site and this was brand new actually.

AFL: So you said no transport and you also said no food.

NVDJ: No food. Well typical I was prepared to get some lunch bag with me, because there was no canteen and no shops and no cafés up the hill. We were allowed to eat in the canteen of the Max Planck, but you preferred not to go there. It wasn't really the type of food you would eat, not even if you were desperate [Laughs], then you prefer to take your lunch packaged or I can also remember that from time to time a little group of people we went on Friday to already celebrate the weekend, we went to the *Bierhelderhof*, had a *Bauernomelette* for

7.50 Mark or there was also in the *Boxberg* area a little restaurant with a nice terrace, so sometimes we did that on Friday and for the rest you had your lunch.

AFL: And the canteen started arriving when?

NVDJ: Oh I don't know, but many, many years later. And then it was the opposite way round and Max Planck people were very keen on coming to the EMBL canteen because this was great, everybody was eating there and it was a success, although at the beginning there were always people complaining, the different nationalities, so the cook had to find an equilibrium between national food from all the nationalities working there. So sometimes we had a French day, another day we had a Chinese day or a Swiss day or whatever and that was good. That solved the food problem.

AFL: So we now have transport and food. [Laughs]

NVDJ: Yeah so the buildings, no buildings, we had then already. The DKFZ container and other containers and then the nowadays Kinderhaus and then the main site, which got bigger and bigger and bigger over the years.

AFL: As it developed.

NVDJ: Yeah.

AFL: I see you made a few notes, I just want to give you the chance to say things that –

NVDJ: Ah yeah one thing when we were talking about the DG office I was working for, for Lennart Philipson, one of the things that was nice, we

had to take care of a chocolate table during Christmas time. I remember now, I'd almost forgotten, yeah because I came across this because the last years, many years, EMBL employees get a few free extra days in between Christmas and New Year, whatever. He didn't do that, he preferred people to work and the last three working days before Christmas we had outside of his and then in our office, we were two secretaries at that time, a large table full of chocolate and things and Christmas things or cookies and <20:00> wine, also wine, which you could either take a bottle away and drink in your lab or over there and have a bit of social life there in front of the DG office area. And we had to fill it up every day, it was cool, so we did chocolate shopping and then put everything there and talking to people, you had work to do but also it was a bit more relaxed and I think it was actually a really nice idea. Yeah, instead of these three days, which is not bad either of course. There was a – yeah as you say, and other Director Generals had other ideas, different ideas.

AFL: So this was under Lennart Philipson.

NVDJ: Yeah.

AFL: Oh wow, the chocolate table.

NVDJ: Yeah, the chocolate table. It was quite big, and people liked it a lot.

AFL: When I talk to people about EMBL, the socialising aspects, it comes up a lot. Is that something you were involved in – clubs or - ?

NVDJ: I wasn't so involved in clubs, but the first maybe 15 years or so, 20, you went to every party, because there weren't so many people and when there was a party everybody was there. So everybody from 50

or 100 people and then it got to maybe 200 and then it got a bit more complicated. But there were many different national parties, we had French parties, we had Italian parties, once we had a Dutch party. I can remember where we cooked Indonesian and we were dressed in the colours, red, white and blue dress and I had an orange one I think, yes, especially made for that, or a salad made in the form of the countries, things like that, on a huge tablet or table, I can't remember now. That was always very nice. Christmas parties were always – every year everybody was there until it started to get too big and we didn't fit in the canteen anymore and then we had to buy tickets and then tickets were sold out and it was a bit different. Yes, many events, many parties and always everybody is coming. I can remember there were a few Dutch people and they are not celebrating Christmas so much but Sinterklass on the 5th December, and then we had a Sinterklass party with everybody in one room. So we had little presents and something to drink I guess, I can't remember.

AFL: So this is the sort of place where everyone brings their own national traditions.

NVDJ: Yes, absolutely. It was really nice.

AFL: That's a lot of variety then.

NVDJ: Absolutely. It was nice. And you knew everybody. I mean time went by and there were new faces but you didn't know a name and then after some more years then you have never seen this face before. That's how it's changing.

AFL: That's fantastic. I was just curious about since you were here for so long you must have had many working relationships with people. Do any particularly stand out or - ?

NVDJ: Yes. Well what I do notice is that the people I've been working for during the first 9, 10, or 15 years, maybe the first 10, I still know names and faces, who belongs together and what they've been doing and – because there were not so many people. I've been checking the alumni list for another office and then I see many names and vaguely the name is known but the ones from the very beginning you knew more personal things, you came to every party and you were talking. Those I know most and they were from all kinds of different working groups. And time went by and you know, more certain categories of people you have to work with, the others you don't know so much anymore. During for example the kindergarten time that was also cool because that was a group of Scandinavian, Spanish, Dutch, and German people, parents working more the same age and we all had the children in the *Kinderhaus* and then we also had great parties there and then every – I can remember once we had to <25:00> do something in relation to the country you're from. And I still can remember the Spanish who had to – who were playing the corrida so you had a toreo, group leaders and the other one had the red towel and the Finnish group had built a sauna and more things like this. The Dutch had to sell some typical pastry. So you knew different groups of people because of the kindergarten. That was also rather new, and we were very lucky to have this, otherwise how do you want to make family, if you both work all day, not possible in Germany because the school system is different. So this helped a lot and was very good.

AFL: So your children were at the *Kinderhaus*?

NVDJ: Well the eldest one who is now 26, there was no baby group at that time, it started with about three, two and a half. The other one started there as a baby, she was the first baby group, so there was about six months or so there. And it was good, really nice. So they've been growing up very international, so they have friends all over the world, as I have colleagues all over the world. But for children, one point is my youngest daughter was a bit unlucky because she had three or four very good friends, little ones, and then they all left to the end of the world, the States, so she never saw them back and this was a bit – yeah, this is the other part of the story, but on the other hand I think they enjoyed it a lot and they are – it's a privilege to grow up like this, so international – they feel comfortable in many countries and many languages and many different people.

AFL: One thing I didn't ask you, before you arrived at EMBL – did you move to EMBL for the position or were you already living here?

NVDJ: No I wasn't living here, I actually came – I was living in Paris at that time, studying there, au pair, and then finishing studies and I thought what can I do? At that time – and then I saw the advert in the newspaper so I applied and came here. That was during summer break and then I started to work here in October. So I came from outside.

AFL: And so your working life started at EMBL?

NVDJ: Yeah I had worked three years in The Netherlands before, collecting money to go somewhere else in the world, but yes.

AFL: So it's really a matter of a long career at EMBL.

NVDJ: Absolutely.

AFL: At which point, so you're one of the few people who stayed here beyond the nine year rule, so it gives you probably quite an interesting perspective on the nine year rule. So when were you first offered to stay for a long time?

NVDJ: I was the first one I think hired on the three year contract. Because I started in October and the employees before me, they all had from the beginning an indefinite contract at that time. I don't know about the scientists, maybe they were different. This I don't know. But the administrative personnel they had indefinite contracts because they were building up, they didn't want to kick them out after a few years because then EMBL is not there anymore. But I was the first one in '75, October, with a three year contract and then I had fulfilled the three contracts and I was offered by John Kendrew the DG, I was offered an indefinite one, so from that time after say nine and a half years or something like this.

AFL: And do you have thoughts on the nine year contract? Because obviously it's still –

NVDJ: I see it really as a privilege to make the decision myself do I stay or do I go. I didn't plan to stay 40 years. [Laughs] At some point I learnt Spanish with the idea in mind I'm going to South America. I was hesitating between Italian and Spanish and I think I was always a practical person – there are more people in the world who speak Spanish than Italian, so for somehow, I started to **<30:00>** learn Spanish and keeping in mind okay I might go to South America,

which I didn't. That was always very interesting and you could practice your languages here, which I did.

AFL: Right. Did you learn German?

NVDJ: Yes, well in The Netherlands German, French and English were a must, so – well I learnt basics. When I came to Germany I thought I have a bit of German, my French was far better at that time because I came from Paris. But then I moved to Walldorf and I thought I'm in another country, no word, it took me a while to get the different accent, dialect and so on. I still also can remember that there were many foreign, so non-German speaking parents and their children at the Kindergarten came home and explained them stories and then they couldn't understand their children because they were far better than the adults of course. Most of them didn't learn German or didn't have time or whatever.

AFL: So what do you think makes EMBL EMBL?

NVDJ: What makes EMBL EMBL? It's the big variety of different people, languages, cultures, habits. What is EMBL? EMBL is something that has to be done, nobody knows how, you invent some way and at the end it works, which makes it interesting I would say.

AFL: Being able to - ?

NVDJ: Yeah, take some initiative, to think, not everything is already done since 100 years and you continue for the next 100 years. I think I wouldn't have stayed 40 years otherwise.

AFL: It sounds like all your jobs have lots of variety –

NVDJ: Absolutely.

AFL: Were there any particular challenges that you were just able to –

NVDJ: I can remember once I was involved in organising a big conference on the premises next door from the *Kernphysik*, about 500 people and I was together with three or four other people at the kind of reception desk because it was not really a reception hall and then there was a couple from the States early morning and they had a little boy, the little boy – they said okay we are so and so, can you please put our – take care of our boy? And I said of course, didn't know how at that second. So then I say "Konrad, what do we do? I have a boy – " say eight or nine or seven years old, "Can he go to – " at that time we already had the Karlsruhe International School or whatever, no European School it was called and he said "Yes of course." So we took the boy to the taxi, every morning a taxi went there and that's how he went there and in the afternoon at two or three he came back to my office and then I had some paper and some pencils to draw, so he was drawing until his parents came. I mean 500 people waiting and they wanted taking care of a boy. I'll never forget that, that was a bit stressful. Or once I had organised a course, a scientific course, and then I was still in the DG office because I had my four jobs, so he came in and said "You know what, can't you ask the Director of the zoo in Heidelberg that you have a weird scientist –" His words, "A weird scientist in your office who'd like to go into the plants and the flowers and look for special types of mice – " or whatever, some kind of animal. And then I said "Of course, I'll phone them." And then I thought I'm too busy, you know, I had my four jobs and that conference was running, I'm not going to phone the Director. So after a while he came and he said "Were you lucky?" And I said "No,

they thought this is really a very weird scientist [Laughs] Very special.
So yeah.

AFL: Are there any specific things on your list?

NVDJ: No, no it was just very spontaneous.

AFL: What would you say to – so you worked a lot with scientists, with administrators, with conferences, with people in Heidelberg, do you have any insights on the relationship between <35:00> Heidelberg the city and EMBL? As you said, the first open day no-one really knew what it was. Has that changed over the years or –

NVDJ: Yes, because then EMBL was known and they were not so strange anymore, so no little green men in the woods any longer, it was more open and there were more open days. There were more publications, sometimes articles in the newspaper, which was not the case at the beginning, nobody knew. This stupid thing was always if you had a prescription from a doctor and you had to go to a pharmacy to get it, we had the right, we had – we still have an EMBL card, insurance card, which you had to show, it has a number, so you just say please get me my stuff and that's it, so no payment and no extra fee and no nothing. But you first had to explain them ten minutes what EMBL is. [Laughs] That's why – but that was at the beginning and now it's very common.

AFL: You're well established.

NVDJ: Yeah, you see more of now, articles in the newspaper, there was no publication office during the first I don't know how many years. We had a photo group, one person, but nobody knew what he was doing

actually. So was the computer group we had, the first computer group was one person, but nobody knew what he was doing, no clue.
[Laughs]

AFL: It's very much building everything from scratch.

NVDJ: Yes, from the bottom. Absolutely.

AFL: And working with scientists, did you ever learn, get interested in the science that was surrounding –

NVDJ: I didn't get interested in the science myself, I think I'm not patient enough for this, because you have to really insist and try – I'm more an organiser, which I really like to do. Planning, organising, multi-tasking, everything at the same time, without forgetting something. Because the scientists, they were there to be served, they did the science and the rest you organised, they didn't ask a lot normally, they just did it. So that's all done.

AFL: Yeah, very pragmatically.

NVDJ: Yes. You tell them where to go and what to do and they do it. And they do their science.

AFL: Would you have a piece of advice for new EMBLers? Someone who joins EMBL today? In whichever capacity.

NVDJ: I would suggest them to be curious and open to everybody – you learn a lot.

AFL: Personally?

NVDJ: Yes, because so many different people, cultures, habits, I think it's interesting and you only get along with them if you are open to learn, to see, to check.

AFL: What they're doing.

NVDJ: Yes, and the important thing of always learning the language. That's why I learned them because I'm not very good at not understanding people. And of course I'm missing a lot of languages [Laughs] You're always missing one. If I'm in a group of Italian people I'm missing Italian, Chinese is not my strongest one.

AFL: So languages and openness.

NVDJ: Absolutely. Be curious and talk to people, see what they are doing.

AFL: So you had a good time at EMBL?

NVDJ: Absolutely and I also have now, one after another. [Laughs] No it was really very interesting and I think it couldn't have been better, otherwise I would have gone and looked for something else, which I didn't.

AFL: Of course, yeah. This has been great Nelly. I'm going to stop the tape unless there's something else?

NVDJ: No, no.

AFL: It's very interesting insights.

NVDJ: It was nice doing it and talking to you and remembering things.

AFL: And personal stories, so thank you very much.

NVDJ: You're very welcome, it was a pleasure to do.

[End of Recording]