

Oral History: Rosemary Wilson / 2017/04/28

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File name: 2017_04_28 RosemaryWilson transcript**Key**

AFL: = Interviewer, Anne-Flore Laloë

RW: = Participant, Rosemary Wilson

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AFL: We are here today. It is Friday 28 April 2017. We are at EMBL in Hamburg, Germany. This interview is part of the oral histories programme of the EMBL archive. My name is Anne-Flore Laloë and I am the archivist at EMBL, the European Molecular Biology Laboratory. Please could you introduce yourself?

RW: My name is Rosemary Wilson. Until recently I was working here at EMBL in Hamburg as the scientific training and outreach officer.

AFL: Could you tell us a bit about yourself first? What were you doing before you arrived at Hamburg?

RW: I am British. I did my undergraduate studies in Birmingham in the UK. The degree was called natural sciences, with a year in continental Europe, which meant I did biology and geology as majors and some German as well, then spent a year in Göttingen in Germany on Erasmus exchange programme. After I finished my degree, I came back to see my contacts and stayed in Germany, in Göttingen, and continued my PhD. I did a PhD in plant phylogenetics actually. Following that, I started as associate editor for a peer-reviewed journal in Göttingen in the field of plant taxonomy where I was working at the time. I did that for two years. I was coordinating and organising the review process, the journals. Then I moved to Hamburg to the position here at EMBL. That was in 2008, nine years ago.

AFL: What was your position when you first arrived? Can you describe the place and how it was when you first set foot at EMBL Hamburg?

RW: Oh gosh. You mean in terms of what the unit was like?

AFL: The look and the feel of the place. Take us back in time!

RW: I remember the interview quite clearly. It wasn't really clear, to be honest, what the job was going to be at the time. I don't think it was really clear to anyone what the job was going to be at that time. I was the first in post and I was recruited as

a scientific training officer so there was no communication in that title, in that area, at the time.

AFL: Who was on the panel?

RW: There was Matthias Wilmanns, the head of the outstation, of course. There was Paul Tucker, who was a group leader at the time, who left a few years ago. He retired a few years ago from Hamburg. There was Nick Goldman from the EBI, who was involved in training at that time – well, still is – and Matthias Haury who was the head of EICAT or the head of the training programme at the time, from Heidelberg. Was there anyone else? I think that might have been it. We had to give a presentation about us, our work, which was also a bit vague.

AFL: This was quite a big change from your position in Göttingen, wasn't it then?

RW: Yes, in a way. I had done teaching in the lab, for example. It was a bit of a change, but like I said, it wasn't really clear to anyone how this position was going to form itself. I think that was the point. Then I started here in April 2008.

AFL: What were you doing when you started then, in this lack of clarity?

RW: It's a long time ago. I really can't remember how I started off. I remember talking to various people, doing questionnaires, what sort of training people would like, appreciate. We had some brainstorming groups together and did some thinking about courses on biochemistry, for example, for the students internally, putting a programme together, schedules together. I took over running the seminar series. There was a staff scientist at the time who was doing that. Slowly then other projects <05:00> came up as well.

AFL: This training was intended for internal or external people at EMBL?

RW: The one I mentioned was internal, for the students. They always had one here on structural biology, and so we expanded the programme slightly. We have done the structural biology since then as well, every two years an internal programme of seminars or lectures. To biochemistry we added biophysics. More of a complete programme covering the research of the institute really. I remember the first phases of talking to different people, trying to work out what was missing, what people want.

AFL: Did you have to learn a lot about a different type of science than you had come across before?

RW: Yes, structural biology is quite different to plant phylogenetics.

AFL: Did you enjoy that?

- RW:** Yes. I don't know if I ever actively learnt about structural biology. I would pick it up. Go to the seminars, attend the seminars and pick these things up as you go along.
- AFL:** Nice to be able to?
- RW:** Yes. Then at some point it became clear that the communications part was a missing part of the portfolio of the institute, something that I could do and wanted to do, so we built that up as well.
- AFL:** The size of the outstation at Hamburg was always roughly the same during the time?
- RW:** I think so, yes. Maybe it has fluctuated – 10 up, 10 down or something – but pretty much the same. I'm just trying to think if we have had an extra group leader along the way, but even with CSSB I don't think so.
- AFL:** The team that you worked in has mostly been with people like Margret Fischer?
- RW:** Yes. At the beginning I struggled slightly finding my position because it is a scientific training officer, but there are scientists here who know the science, of course, and I was coming from a different background so I am not an expert in the science that they are doing. If you are talking about training courses, there is the admin team who are very expert in running events, so I was trying to find that position. I have always worked very closely with the admin team. I think they would probably say that they adopted me, or Margret would say that she adopted me at some point.
- AFL:** Who was your reporting line then?
- RW:** I reported to Matthias Wilmanns, the head of outstation. Head of unit. We don't say outstation!
- AFL:** Yes, things change.
- RW:** I was reporting directly to him. Of course built up contacts with the EICAT team in Heidelberg. I am just thinking. That would be Matthias Haury who was a good contact at the time, his team and of course the conferences office, for example. Sally Boehm at the time. Also had quite good contacts with EBI. At the time, it was just training. It was training and outreach in one group run by Cath Brooksbank. I went there quite a few times and we had quite a good exchange between the scientific training officers. It was James Watson at the time and Vicky Schneider. We identified quite a lot of overlap in terms of topic and we started up a course together. We applied for funding from EMBO and got – I can't remember what it was called now – structural biology something. That was a

successful course not only in terms of the topics <10:00>. It was running from the lab stuff here as well into the bioinformatic tools and the tools that the EBI have, but also a lot of our in-house scientists were teaching there and they were getting a lot from it as well with the exchange, not just in terms of the students. There was initially quite a bit of exchange there. That changed when Vicky and James left. Those were my immediate contacts. The team then became instead of communications and training or training and outreach, they have now got a dedicated communications team and a dedicated training team so the contact was a bit different. Now I have lost what the question was.

AFL: The evolution of your job during your nine years at EMBL, the focuses that changed.

RW: I can't remember exactly when it changed, to be honest, but certainly at some point it became apparent that I was quite suited to do the communications side of things and I wanted to do it. I could see there also probably more potential than the training side of things because if I was doing external courses we only have a certain number a year. We have an admin team who are expert in running courses – they don't need me to butt in and take over – and we have the scientists who of course are the experts in the science, so it was finding that role for me. The communications was a whole new field that definitely needed doing, and something that I wanted to do and I could see potential in as well. At some point, my contract was changed and my position was changed to scientific training and outreach officer.

AFL: That is when communication really became part of your...?

RW: Yes. I think it crept in. Probably we needed news stories written. 'I'll do it.' Then it became part and a large focus of the work that I did.

AFL: You said it was something you were interested in, that you saw potential for development in. Is it that you enjoyed writing? What do you mean by that?

RW: I think so. I think what I liked about the communication was I had a story. I could see it through from beginning to end. It was my product and that is very satisfying. Someone comes to you with a paper or a story. I wrote it, it got published and I could say, 'Look, this is what I did.' It was from beginning to end, so that was very satisfying. I think I have always written, but I couldn't say I have done short stories all my life or poetry.

AFL: There's no origin story to your stories?

RW: My father, even at my wedding, stood up and told about the story I wrote when I was 10 or something about my bunny rabbit.

AFL: So there, perhaps, is an origin story?

- RW:** Maybe that was the origin: the one all about the bunny rabbit. In my time at my PhD I set up a newsletter for the institute. It had a brief life, I think. When I left, it probably died, but I set that up and was interested in organising the content, for example, of the web pages and initiated a content management system there. The job as editor at the journal, I was doing text editing and stuff there as well, so it was probably a natural progression in some ways.
- AFL:** A way with words?
- RW:** Yes.
- AFL:** The stories that you started working here, were they for internal, external? What was the setup there?
- RW:** What was the web page at that time? I think it was external stories. I think they were mainly external stories. There might have been some internal over the intranet as well, but mainly for external, for the web page external users and then for the newsletter as well <15:00>. At that time it was a newsletter. We didn't have a magazine at that time, it was a newsletter.
- AFL:** The predecessor to EMBL etc.?
- RW:** Yes.
- AFL:** Can you talk us through the process of how a story would happen from start to finish?
- RW:** This is also a change, the editorial process that we went through. I think originally it was probably just someone came to me with a story. Maybe Matthias or someone suggested it to me – there was a research paper maybe coming up or was being published – to write a short story on that. We had events that could be reported on, like large courses, conferences. We would produce reports on that. I think with the newsletter there was probably a call. I remember a call from the editors saying, 'Have you had any events recently? Any papers coming up?' I would do maybe a whisk round the group leaders. 'Anything coming up?' Maybe the administration team knew of something. Propose them, write them up. Later, very recently probably even, the editorial process has become more streamlined, more transparent. I think at the time it was probably me writing it. For a lot of the stuff on the news web pages it was quite Hamburg-centric. That means I would write it, Matthias would say, 'Yes, that's fine to go,' and it would go on the web pages. There was less editorial stuff. For press releases, that of course went through Heidelberg. It had to go through the press office or the press officer. Sonia Furtado would do the press stuff. Lena Raditsch, the head of communications at the time, would check and approve it, maybe give some feedback on audience, contents, language level.

AFL: So you have seen quite a few different of the processes of disseminating EMBL stories?

RW: Yes.

AFL: Do you have any particular stories that stand out, something that you particularly enjoyed working on or didn't, or that was a challenge that you want to share, or not?

RW: I am very thankful to the communications team in Heidelberg for their support. I have learnt a lot from them. I think once they realised that I wanted to write as well, they were very happy to support me. I learnt a lot from their feedback and their comments on my text, for example, especially in the last year with the new head, Dan Noyes. He definitely pushed me to go beyond my comfort zone and try something else. The one that maybe was quite a challenge was the opinion piece on impostor syndrome. That was baring my soul, if you like. It wasn't writing about someone else's science, it had my name on it. I was talking about my thoughts. That was putting myself out there. That was quite a level higher, if you like. The text I wrote initially I think was OK, and he said, 'No, go one step further.' That was a challenge. I think one of the other ones I would say is a – breakthrough is too big a word, but stands out is maybe the story about the flu with Stephen Cusack. Was that 2012 already? No, it can't have been that early. I think that was also maybe a turning point or a point where I realised what I could do, getting the positive feedback from outside as well. It's always a challenge trying to communicate quite complex science in a compelling, interesting way that people are going to want to read and finding that balance between <20:00> scientific accuracy and content, and the interest in a language that people will want to read and not turn off straight away.

AFL: What is the language like of these pieces? Again, to communicate something quite complex, if you just have 400 words, is that something that adds to the problems?

RW: In some ways, yes. Short ones are harder than longer ones, of course. Some of the longer pieces – feature-length articles I would say – are round about 1,000 words, but we also do shorter announcements or press releases, round about 400-500 words. Maybe 700 max or something like that.

AFL: You mentioned Heidelberg. Do you have thoughts on the dynamics between EMBL's disparate sites and the way that it works through that? You have seen it work or not work in being based in Hamburg and working with people across the countries.

RW: In terms of communication or just generally?

AFL: Both. As you wish.

RW: I have been here nine years. I have been to EBI and I have been to Heidelberg of course, but I have never been to Grenoble and I have never been to Monterotondo. Bit of a shame, I suppose. It also shows where my main connections are. I have some connections with Grenoble because of the structural biology component there. Of course the main contact is Heidelberg. That's where everything is centralised. That is where the main offices are. In terms of communication, I do try, and I think also in these last few years there has been a lot of effort to try and bring people in. There is a dedicated team of communications in EBI in the UK. There has been a concerted effort to be more involved and consider ourselves one team, just in different places. The communications team have always considered me a member of their team although I don't have the same line manager, for example. I sit up here. We are always in daily contact. First there was SKYPE, then we used other networking tools, which were a great help, like Slack for example, videoconferencing and regular meetings via videoconferencing. It's not quite the same. You don't quite get the feeling. If there is something going on in the team – subtle tensions or something unspoken – you don't get it, but it has helped. I have certainly always felt very close to them. We were working together every day. I found no distance – well, not too much of a distance. You can't do everything virtually. EBI were a bit more distant, I suppose, from me, but then maybe I could have tried more to reach out to them rather than just reach out to Heidelberg. The other sites – there is no one in Grenoble or Monterotondo who specifically does communication or training, so the contact hasn't really been there, I suppose. Grenoble in terms of training, we had monthly catch-ups, VC, with representatives <25:00> from across the sites so that was quite useful to know what's going on in different places. There was an effort, but they don't have a person like me in Monterotondo and Grenoble. They couldn't really concentrate on reaching out maybe. I think that helps, having those people who are really trying to bridge those gaps. I don't know if I have really answered your question at all.

AFL: I always find it interesting to hear about the dynamics between the different EMBL sites. More locally then, how about the relationships on campus? Is that something that takes some of your time, working with the DESY or working with the on-site partners the EMBL hosts, or not at all?

RW: I have made an effort to make those contacts and I have a good network on site. They are very important collaborators. For example, the DESY PR group.

AFL: What does that stand for?

RW: Public relations. The communications team on campus for DESY. I think we had that contact quite early. Every two years here on campus there is a large outreach event, a Night of Science, and a DESY open day – every two years in November. How did the first contact come around? I joined in 2008. I think it was in 2008 maybe in the autumn, the first event maybe could have been. That of course involves a lot of collaboration and coordination across the whole site. DESY PR, the communications team, heads that outfit. Maybe they got in touch with us first or maybe they contacted me and said, 'This is what's going to

happen. I'll come and see you. Can we talk about this?' Then there were regular meetings bringing everyone – all the representatives from the different institutes – together to talk about what is needed, what information do we need to give them and stuff. They are a very important contact for that, for example, when we have these Night of Sciences, to collaborate with them on that. I also made an effort to try and reach out to the other institutes.

AFL: How many institutes on campus are there?

RW: I don't know. Maybe I can explain. DESY runs and maintains the whole site. DESY is a member of the Helmholtz Association, which has 18 centres, I think, across Germany, largely funded by government and local government. DESY runs the site. They put all these big instruments on site, so there's the synchrotrons and stuff. Those are DESY instruments and the rest of us use them. EMBL has three beamlines on the big PETRA III synchrotron. They are our beamlines or EMBL's beamlines. They have been paid for and made by EMBL, and run by EMBL scientists, but the big synchrotron itself is DESY, for example. They run the site. However, I actually learnt not too long ago – maybe by one of the Night of Sciences – that the University of Hamburg does actually own part of the campus. We are inside the ring, if you like. The large PETRA III ring runs pretty much round the whole campus. The other side of the ring is Uni Hamburg land. Uni Hamburg has quite a large presence on campus. Quite a lot of their physics departments, their physics-orientated research, is done on the campus. They are a large partner on campus. I don't know if I actually know any Uni Hamburg people. I'm just thinking, because they are usually part of a collaboration... there is the CFEL – the Centre for Free-Electron Laser Sciences – DESY, University of Hamburg and Max Planck as major partners. Max Planck are also building a large building now across the way <30:00>. I had contact with the Max Planck officer, for example. I suppose with main players, Uni Hamburg is quite a large one actually. They have got a few buildings being built now. DESY communications team were a big collaboration partner for me. For press releases, for example, we collaborated. We got quite a few press releases because they wanted to communicate science that was done on their machines. If we had science that was done on our beamline, for example, we of course wanted to communicate it because it was EMBL science, they were interested about it because it was done on their machines, so we communicated or coordinated quite a lot of press releases as well. I think the science writer or the editor there came and introduced himself quite early in my time, and from then I maintained the contact with him regularly. There is another group in the CFEL building who I also had a similar relationship with. If we had done some work together with Uni Hamburg scientists who were on site then we would collaborate and make sure that there was text done. In terms of training as well, there were quite a few partners on campus who I tried to regularly catch up with and regularly exchange information. There is a graduate school on campus, which is DESY and Uni Hamburg. They have so-called soft skill courses for their students and our students are allowed to go to their courses, so I would tell our students, 'Go and apply for these courses.' We would try and collaborate there. We collaborated also on career days – women's career days. I would try and support them, pay for the catering so that EMBL was also sponsoring. We did a few

events. We did at least one event with CUI, which is the Centre for Ultrafast Imaging, which is also over there. There is also somehow a collaboration of Uni Hamburg and DESY and something. We got together. She is the gender equality officer there and did the workshop on impostor syndrome for women in science, for example. We would have loved to have done more. It's just somewhere something has got to be priority over other things. I would really have liked to have done more in terms of the networking. These networking and collaborative partners, I think, were very important, are very important. That is communication as well, right? Our people are mixing with them and cross-fertilising, getting to meet. At these events, for example, there were top uni professors coming and talking about how they got on in science. I think at least the culture of the campus, of which we are a great part, so I think that was important. I would have liked to have done more.

AFL: It sounds extremely dynamic. You mentioned the Night of Science. Can you describe that briefly because that sounds pretty fun?

RW: Yes. Fun, mind-boggling, amazing. That happens every second year in November. This year it's on 4 November if you want to come! It's the Night of Science in Hamburg, which means that scientific institutes and organisations open their doors from 7:00 in the evening or something like that until midnight. DESY combines that with their open day, which means that the DESY site is open from midday until midnight. I think last time there were 18,000 people on campus.

AFL: 18,000?

RW: Yes! It's a lot of people, I can tell you.

AFL: Doing what?

RW: **<35:00>** Everyone, I think, who wants to can organise something on campus. Last time, we organised something for the kids. We had crystal fishing for the kids. We had big swimming pools with crystals, fist-sized, and the kids can come and see how many crystals they can fish out as an analogy for the scientists fishing – they call it fishing: taking the protein crystals out of their plates before taking them to the beamline. We had that. It was completely overrun. Then we had a ball game on protein membranes from the Löw group. Christian Löw and his group study membrane proteins. It opens to let a molecule in and shuts to let the molecule go through the other side. They made a 3D model which swings back and forwards. You could throw a ball in and it would go through the membrane. If you won, you got a big prize or something. Then there were beamline tours. The guys were showing the beamlines, taking visitors around the beamlines. And some computer games with 3D molecules, looking at different molecules or proteins, 3D shapes on the computer. You could look at proteins under a microscope. We set up these different stations, manned them over these 12 hours in three-hour shifts or something. It's great fun. It's extremely

knackering. Since it's 12 hours, I'm usually there at 9:00 in the morning setting up. I don't go home till after 1:00. Then I can't walk anymore because I've been on my feet all that time. It's great fun and I think everyone who takes part is extremely thankful that they have taken part. My job is putting that programme together, making sure that we have coordinated with DESY, that they have got all the information they want. We have to register everyone. For security reasons, everyone here needs to know about parking spaces or how to get on the campus. I coordinate it also with the Stadt, with the city, because there is a big science event management team who are running the event properly with websites and programmes. They have got their deadlines for information for the web page or ordering brochures or posters or whatever. It is extremely rewarding. It is a lot of work. I think everyone is really glad they do it when they do it. It is knackering. 18,000 people. It's just ongoing. Pretty much for those whole 12 hours it's non-stop. Even the beamline tours are overrun. I think they intended to do it for four hours and then after midnight they were still going.

AFL: That sounds like a great event that combines outreach, science communication, training, everything.

RW: That's the thing. A lot of people say training and outreach are so different, but I see so many overlaps. I see so many common goals and opportunities for cross-fertilisation. Networking, training, outreach: I see that as a whole. It's all about a culture. It's all about the society on campus or the way we talk about science. It combines pretty much everything.

AFL: To 18,000 people at a go?

RW: It's pretty hectic, yes.

AFL: I just have a couple more questions if I may. Is there anything you would describe as one of the biggest changes you saw in your nine years at EMBL or not? Anything that was one way when you started?

RW: At EMBL itself?

AFL: Or in your job, at EMBL Hamburg? Something that changed dramatically or not, big or small.

RW: I think the communication. Then I found my footing. <40:00> Someone said, 'You found your stride.' That is probably it. I shaped the position. That is also a nice thing at EMBL. You can really find your niche, you can try things out and you get the opportunity – or at least I had the opportunity – to shape the job to suit my interests or to make it your own. I think once the communication side came in, that started taking shape and that went to another level when we had a new website, for example – a new news website. There was a different level of interaction between me and the team in Heidelberg and a different level of input

from my side. I think there was definitely more of a change then, more of a visibility of me as a writer. I think that even changed again when Dan joined the team last January I think. Was it last January? Last February I think he joined. There was another concerted effort to bring everyone closer together. Then I was being involved in the editorial process as well, and I have learnt a lot from those changes.

AFL: That's great. Do you have a piece of advice for people joining EMBL today, a story that stands out, something that you want to communicate about being at EMBL or life in general?

RW: Oh dear. Like I said, EMBL is a great place for finding your own niche, for finding your feet. I suppose that flexibility. If you want to try something out or collaborate with someone else, I think there is a lot of scope to be able to do that at EMBL. I think that is a great thing. You don't have that everywhere, or at least I don't think so. You really have that opportunity to find your niche and find what you want to do. Use it! There are so many different opportunities to meet people who are outside your research group or work group. If you want to try something else, go and see someone else in another lab, just do it. Take the opportunity. Who knows where it can lead?

AFL: That's a great piece of advice. Thank you. Do you have anything else you want to say before we wrap up?

RW: I can't think of anything. Is there anything I missed out?

AFL: No. This was really great, a really nice recollection of your nine years at EMBL. Thank you very much, Rosemary.

RW: Thank you.

<End of Interview>