

„Geisteswissenschaftlicher Hochschuldialog der Universitäten Erlangen und Damaskus“

“Self-Perception and the Perception of the Other in Politics, History and Culture“

Concluding Conference, Damascus Dec. 16. 2009

Concluding remarks by Prof. Dr. Thomas Philipp:

„Dear Colleagues, dear Students, Ladies and Gentlemen,

This has been a long and intensive day of sessions but before we close, it is not just the custom but also my personal desire to say thanks to all those who have made this whole project possible and help to bring it to its fruition.

Our first thanks go, of course, to our gracious host, the University of Damascus and its President. He and the university supported this project enthusiastically from the beginning. The willingness to establish a new and highly innovative Master’ study program, the readiness to give us space and shelter in the university and the financial support were of greatest help.

Thanks go also to the University of Erlangen, which provided much of the administrative framework, working space and overhead cost for this enterprise.

Last but by no means least; the DAAD deserves our gratitude for having picked up the bill for the project and having advised us on many issues.

Our sincere thanks also go to all those lecturers, Syrian and German, who gave us their time and efforts to teach courses, run workshops and advise students, in Germany as well as in Syria.

The participating students – our professional *raison d’être* - were of enormous help in making this project successful. To watch your enthusiasm, your engagement in the project and your

intellectual curiosity was our greatest reward and gave us the greatest pleasure. Your patience and stamina to continue at moments, when you could not be sure that this whole enterprise was not a big waste of your time or would indeed lead to a Master degree gave us courage to carry on. You deserve our greatest thanks of all.

When we started with this project, I suspect, neither Dr. Dalal nor I knew what we were getting into. We had grossly underestimated the enormous amount of hard work and long hours, to carry this project through. Here we are especially grateful to those students who worked as assistants to Dr. Dalal: Abier, Chadi, Gila, Razan and Stefanie, Bureaucracies, I learned very quickly, are very similar anywhere. To have to work with and satisfy three different ones, two universities and one foundation, was no small achievement and took long hours and patience.

I think this is the moment where I would like to draw your attention to the great and irreplaceable role Dr. Dalal Arsuzi-Elamir played in this project, of which she was also the initiator. I have known Dr, Dalal since she was a graduate student at the University of Erlangen. Sometime after concluding her Master and before finishing her Ph.D. she observed that the academic relations between all those, who dealt with Middle Eastern studies at the University of Erlangen, and colleagues at Arab universities were non-existent. This was true at the level of teachers as well as at that of students. Having her Diploma from the University of Damascus and her advanced degrees from the University of Erlangen, where she also became a lecturer, she was in the unique position to be familiar with both universities. Hence it was a natural step to translate her observation into action by beginning to establish relations between these two universities. Her first step was to “put Damascus on the mental map” of the German colleagues and students. She advised students about the options of studying in Damascus, she invited Syrian professors as visiting lecturers and she found money for small projects in Syria with Syrian students. Receiving some more grant money, we held a workshop in Damascus and gave some public lectures. This led eventually to a contract of cooperation between the Universities Erlangen-Nuremberg and the Damascus; a formal framework for the exchange of lecturers, students and different forms of academic cooperation. The driving force behind was Dr. Dalal Arsuzi-Elamir.

Soon thereafter, the DAAD announced its program called “Arab-German Academic Dialogue”, which seemed to us exactly what we had been looking for. We applied with our

project “Self-Perception and Perception of the Other” . From the moment it was accepted and long before any money was actually paid out, Dr. Dalal began to work furiously on the preparations, because it dawned upon us that it was a fairly ambitious project and three years suddenly appeared as a very short time. Some of the major and pressing issues were the formal establishment of a new Master’s study program at the University of Damascus, the recognition of this program by the University of Erlangen and last but not least, to find the right students for it. It is thanks to Dr. Dalal that all these aims were achieved.

I do not want to bore you with details but let me assure you that for the last three years Dr. Dalal has been working more than a full time job on this project and certainly much more than the financial recompensation from the University of Erlangen would indicate. She assumed the responsibility for all aspects of converting a project proposal into an action plan. She developed new concepts such as student-run workshops; she saw the need for internships for German students in Syria and Syrian students in Germany. It was certainly one of the best ways to gain insight into the other society; her concern for the students never diminished.

Besides many other qualities, Dr. Dalal is a keen observer of human nature in addition to being very target-minded in her actions. Those were the qualities – together with a great amount of patience and persistence – which enabled her to negotiate successfully with the various administrations; be it for establishment of a new Master’s study program in Damascus, be it for facilities in Erlangen or for ways to shift moneys in our budget from the DAAD.

But the range of activities needed to carry this project through was much wider: From finding lecturers for all courses, to such banal issues as student housing and terrifying experiences as the emergency landing of an air plane with some of our students on it. Dr. Dalal dealt with it all in sovereign fashion.

She has guided this project through a veritable obstacle course which sometimes seemed to turn a course of obstructions. If we can say today that this project has been a success – and the sheer fact that we are convened here with the graduating students, proves it – our thanks for it go to Dr. Dalal Arsuzi-Elamir.