



Prof. Dr. Sandra L. López Varela

CONGRATULATIONS ON THE 200TH
ANNIVERSARY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF BONN

Dear Rektor Prof. Dr. Dr. h. c. Michael Hoch

One can only imagine what your distinguished alumni, including Nobel Laureates Dr. Paul and Dr. Selten; influential philosophers such as Karl Marx and Friederich Nietzsche; and Max Ernst, representative of German Expressionism; along with one of the greatest statesmen the world has seen, Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, were thinking, when they walked through the halls of Kurfürstliches Schloss: undoubtedly, great ideas and expectations. Certainly, others, such as myself, who also have crossed its halls during my apprenticeship as a Humboldt alumna, had more humble and mundane thoughts and experiences in between 1996 and 1998 that I would like to share with you, and the people of Bonn, as a celebratory token of gratitude during this special milestone.

Die Vorbereitung

In 1996, I earned my PhD in Archaeology at the University of London, becoming the first in my class to achieve this degree and to have no academic position at any institution. Many may relate hitting this crossroad in life, torn between going back home jobless or keep living from grants. "Work hard, dream big", guided me to apply to one of the most prestigious grants a scholar could receive, a Humboldt fellowship. I wasn't successful the first time. My determination won at the end, while my choice was questioned by most in my surroundings. What's wrong with Germany? It is a cold and unfriendly country with an obscure past. Even if during the Romantic period, breeding composers who could write music with an indescribable passion, sentiment, and grief, to me, it didn't make sense. With my father's words, "hold the name of your country in high regard", I arrived to Bonn's Hauptbahnhof, only to be encountered by Prof. Dr. Hanns Prem, may he rest in peace, who drove me to my apartment in the Herderstrasse in Bad Godesberg, and gave me a brown bag with milk, bread, cheese and ham to start a journey that changed my life forever.

Die Kopfschmerzen, die eigentlich keine waren

The Humboldt Foundation kindly gave me a valuable booklet with a list of German habits to pave my way during my research that I followed to the letter. Yes, the Germans are very direct and will correct you while you are learning their language. Even if learning German for hours at the Goethe Institut in Bad Godesberg through a course given me by the Foundation, would give me a headache at the end and my practice of the language was corrected regularly on the street, I realized people were trying to help me, not minimize me. Soon, I realized their "say it straight" was saving me a lot of time. Optics, one could say. The opportunity to learn the language, which you can clearly notice I cannot express in writing, linked myself with the invigorating atmosphere that surrounded Bonn in those days that was still the state capital. Prof. Prem and his wife, Ursula Dyckerhoff, sadly deceased too, made sure I didn't feel alone,

away from my family, by inviting me to dinner at their place or at their favorite restaurants, even to their walks through Bonn's forests and mountains, although much taller than me, for me, their strolls were runs. From the bus driver, the bank assistant, the fruit vendor, and the baker, they offered me their help and kindness during those amazing years that I lived in Germany. I will always keep in my heart a couple who kindly bought me some tea and helped with my bag when I got off the train at Dusseldorf Airport, because they saw me crying, inconsolably, as I headed home to the unexpected passing of my eldest sister. An undoubtedly warm and kind gesture, characterizing what Germany has always been about.

Der Forschungsaufenthalt

I remember my first ride on the bus from Bad Godesberg to the Römerstrasse, where the Seminar für Völkerkunde, now the Abteilung für Altamerikanistik, was located back then. I remember feeling excited about it, but, at the same time, I feared not matching the high scientific standards, that have characterized German scholars for centuries, and above all, if a Mexican woman and scholar, a third world country citizen, would have anything to offer and would be welcomed by students and colleagues at the Seminar. I arrived at Prof. Prem's office and he introduced me to my new colleagues and students, as I had the privilege of teaching a class that is now conducting research in Mexico.

How wrong were all those prejudices regarding German culture I have heard before. First, I was surprised, überrascht, at the staff, colleagues and students, welcoming me in their impeccable Spanish. Dr. Barbara Goebel, a post doc student like me back then, now head of the Ibero Amerikanisches Institut in Berlin, took me out for lunch and explained to me the workings of the Seminar, while asking me about my research on Maya pottery from Belize, and sharing our professional fears of getting a job, of having children, of simply being professional women. I have rich memories from each and everyone that worked at the Seminar, even from the kind cleaning lady, who wholeheartedly, cooked for me Turkish delicacies. Back home, at Godesberg, whenever I found a member of the AvH Stiftung, the first thing they would say to me was, is everything fine, how are things at your institute, we are here for you. Was I not welcomed, was I not lucky in making Germany my second Heimat? Not even today, I have been treated with such respect and kindness for who I am, as a person and a professional scholar.

What about my research? Results from my investigations at the time I was in Germany, not only were innovative and have inspired others. My investigations express the goals of doing science in archaeology, of the importance of networking, and of teamwork. Yes, it took me a while to put together a team of scholars from various universities in Europe to help me with my research. However, Prof. Prem supported me and helped me get funds. At the Freie Universität Berlin, Dr. Schneider and Dr. Daszkiewicz said to me, "if you don't have a problem to solve, we cannot help you." A professional lesson, that I have passed on to my students, and why not, to many of my colleagues, who think pushing the button of a portable instrument and finding the elemental composition of an object equates to doing archaeology. The philosophical based science that distinguishes the German academy, makes it an ideal place to solve the many problems our societies worldwide face today.

Wachstum

While I was in Germany, I applied for a job nearby a university in Mexico City. Going back to a threshold economy, such as Mexico, wasn't that easy. The Humboldt Foundation made sure I would go back with a computer to set me up and to continue my work. I had never received any grants from my country. I had to pay for my graduate studies by working at McDonalds and filing microfiches for a consulting firm in London. How can I not be grateful to the people of Germany who invested in my professional career through the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation? Tax payer's money, where did it end. Thanks to you all, I am a tenured professor at Mexico's National University (UNAM). I became President/Vicepresident of the Society for Archaeological Sciences (2007-2011). I held the Archaeology Chair at the American Anthropological Association, as an Executive Board Member (2011-2014). I acted as Treasurer of the Sociedad Mexicana de Antropología (2015-2017). I was even President of the Mexican Humboldt Alumni Club (2008-2011). These achievements are now a combination of your support and of those main organizations funding research in Mexico. Your citizens might not be aware of what they have done for me personally and professionally, so this is an opportunity to let them know too, that I took my research to unexplored new areas in archaeology, by contributing to social sustainability through impact assessments of policies combating poverty in Mexico, a study that is giving much thought to other countries and scholars. Needless to say, I earned another prestigious award from the Foundation, the Friedrich Wilhelm Bessel-Forschungspreis. The path has been bitter sweet, specially, as a woman and a scholar. However, your respect to my research and to who I am, has guided me to face many challenges with grace, courage, and determination.

Freundschaft

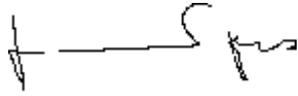
I am honored to have found out that friendship to the Germans means forever. I am very privileged, not in wealth; rather in the rich experiences you have given me. I want you to know that whenever I am invited by the appointed German Ambassador in Mexico to celebrate your "Tag der Deutschen Einheit" and I hear the first strokes of Haydn's String Quartet "The Emperor", and the sound of Hoffman's words resonate by those present, I own "Einigkeit und Recht und Freiheit".

Bis bald!

As you mark 200 years of success, I hope my words justify your every reason for you to feel proud of the University's achievements throughout its history and influence in so many of us living in far away lands. I am certain, that under your guidance, the University of Bonn will continue to engage students and scholars around the world for many years to come. Rest assured, that I have dedicated myself to reproduce the University's values and the spirit of what it means to be a Humboldtian, you all have embedded in me, as I was recently rewarded by my daughter's teacher saying to her, "she had the values of the Humboldt School running through her blood." Still, I wish I could do more to demonstrate my indebtedness to you all.

May a myriad of changing and innovative ideas for the benefit of humanity and world peace may continue to be fostered through this unique space of knowledge exchange!

Yours most sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sandra L. López Varela'. The signature is stylized with a large 'S' and 'L'.

Prof. Dr. Sandra L. López Varela