

Alumnus at work: Tobias Providoli

Team leader at swisstopo.

Interview: Bettina Huber



Tobias Providoli

Tobias Providoli studied geography at the University of Basel and works for the Federal Office of Topography (swisstopo) in Wabern near Bern. He now leads a production team working on the topographic landscape model (TLM) and is also involved in AlumniGeo.

UNI NOVA: Mr. Providoli, how did you come to pursue this career?

PROVIDOLI: After my studies, I completed a graduate internship in the TLM process at the Federal Office of Topography, where the staff are building a 3D geodata set for Switzerland and Liechtenstein. High-resolution aerial images are used to stereoscopically record a large number of natural objects – such as forests, lakes, glaciers, watercourses and individual trees – and man-made objects (such as buildings, streets, railroads and bridges). My one-year internship allowed me to watch my colleagues at work and familiarize myself with the geodatabase. I have always been interested in aerial images and really enjoyed capturing objects in 3D, so I applied for a project manager position. More and more people were being hired to help build the TLM and the existing production teams were becoming bigger and bigger, so another production team was eventually established. I've been managing this team since 2014.

UNI NOVA: How did your studies at the University of Basel prepare you for this career path?

PROVIDOLI: The geography program covers a wide range of topics and students have a lot of flexibility to choose what they study. They are given the opportunity to specialize at an early stage, in addition to the compulsory lectures of the initial semesters. I soon realized that I enjoy working with geodata in Geographic Information Systems (GIS). I attended pretty much every GIS course on offer. GIS was also an inte-

gral part of my master's thesis, in which I studied the shifting of forest lines in Switzerland and Canada. The knowledge and skills I acquired during my studies were the ideal foundation for my graduate internship at swisstopo and for entering the world of work.

UNI NOVA: What aspects of your studies made a particular impact?

PROVIDOLI: University was a totally new phase of my life. I had lived with my parents while still at school. Before starting university, I moved into an apartment in Basel with my brother and began to cut the apron strings. I learned to be independent and take responsibility. My geography studies included lots of project work, which required independence, self-organization and motivation, as well as team work and good communication. I came to know many of my fellow students very well and friendships developed. Thanks to the modest number of geography students, the atmosphere was very pleasant and almost familial, particularly during my master's. This is where my foundations were laid, and this is why I became involved in AlumniGeo after my studies. It allows me to meet with alumni and other like-minded people. Graduates are spread throughout Switzerland and all over the world, so this provides an opportunity to remain in contact. In today's fast-paced world, I think this is extremely important. ■



New organization

Launch of AlumniPharmazie.

Text: Bettina Volz-Tobler

AlumniPharmazie, a new specialist alumni organization that is long overdue, will be launched at the alumni general assembly in June 2020. This process has been driven by the executive board of the Basel Pharmaceutical Society (Pharmazeutische Gesellschaft Basel), which has been around for almost 100 years.

The Basel Pharmaceutical Society was launched in 1921 by dedicated community pharmacists. To this day, it offers specialist lectures, continuing education, seminars and tours for members and non-members and boasts many years of experience in continuing education and professional development. It has been officially recognized as a training provider by the Swiss Pharmacists Association (pharmaSuisse) since 2002.

Tradition and innovation

To attract more University of Basel pharmacy graduates and maintain their con-

tact with the alma mater, the executive board of the Pharmaceutical Society has decided to set up a specialist alumni group under the auspices of AlumniBasel. Members are to be provided with specific training services and access to AlumniBasel's many activities and member perks – not to mention more opportunities to communicate, the online members' platform, various social events, networking opportunities and member benefits, all of which are offered as standard by the Alumni-Basel umbrella organization.

Basel has a long tradition of pharmaceutical sciences, which for some years have been boosting innovation to international acclaim: In July 2019, the Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences at the University of Basel moved into the top 50 of the Global Academic Ranking. In the same year, two endowed professorships funded by Vifor Pharma were announced in the field of nanopharmacy. The Vifor Pharma Group's funding commitment of CHF 10 million over ten years aims to es-

tablish nanopharmacy research at the University of Basel and support the training of specialists in this field. Who knows whether the 60 or so Basel alumni working for Vifor Pharma played a role in the board's decision ...

Two new endowed professorships

The two new professorships in Nanopharmaceutical and Regulatory Science aim to establish an internationally renowned excellence platform for the development, approval and application of nanopharmaceuticals and the training of specialists in this field. Pharmaceutics will play a major role in the University of Basel's domestic and international standing, and we hope that the pride this inspires in alumni will help AlumniPharmazie to prosper. Members can register online at alumnibasel.ch. ■



New publication

The memoirs of Dieter Imboden.

Dieter Imboden, an environmental researcher and political scientist who spent much of his childhood in Basel, is a past winner of the Alumni Award. He recently published his autobiography.

The 2017 Alumni Award winner Dieter Imboden has just published his memoirs in book form. Becoming a renowned environmental researcher and political scientist was not the result of a carefully laid plan, but when the opportunities arose, he seized them. “Life is largely a matter of chance,” he writes early in the book, “but that does not absolve us of the responsibility to mold chance into opportunity.”

Studies in Berlin, Basel and Zurich

Born in 1943 in Zurich, he tells the story of little Dieter, growing up in a family of seven in Küsnacht, who discovers a pas-

sion for the railway and ponders which gods gave people their identity. When his father, the constitutional and administrative law expert Max Imboden, took a position at the University of Basel, the ten-year-old had his first experience of being different and having to integrate in the city’s St. Alban district. Shortly before turning 19, at a time when academic mobility was still a foreign concept, he began a degree in physics in a Berlin recently divided by the wall.

Later, he returned to Basel, where in spite of his own ineptitude on the dance floor he won the heart of a dancer – his future wife Sybil – and completed his degree. Academically, Imboden always followed his own path: “I can clearly remember when, toward the end of my doctorate, I told my colleagues I was giving up theoretical physics to study lakes. What about

physics, what about academic rigor, they asked, certain that this decision would scupper my academic career forever.”

Letting go and saying goodbye

It didn’t turn out that way. Convinced of the importance of interdisciplinary research and undeterred by pushback from the established disciplines, the limnologist and a handful of colleagues founded the new degree program in environmental sciences at ETH Zurich. Their visionary concept made ETH one of the world’s leading universities for interdisciplinary environmental studies and research. Imboden became a professor of environmental physics, and went on to head the new department. From 2005 to 2012, he played a part in shaping research policy in Switzerland as President of the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) research council. Imboden recounts all of this openly and self-critically, with no trace of vanity. He also writes of his time at the head of the “2000-watt society” project in the ETH Domain, a position he relinquished after two years as he felt that the idea was ahead of its time, and that his efforts were being blocked by disputes among the institutions.

Work isn’t everything, however: The reader also learns how Imboden and his wife succeeded in reconciling their careers with family life, raising two children in an era before nurseries and day schools. Or how the couple and their dog navigated the rivers and canals of Europe for years in their own boat. Finally, the book is about letting go and saying goodbye to friends. Imboden describes the importance of realizing that “more and more goodbyes will be forever, even though we can – fortunately – never know which.” A profound and humorous book that encourages the reader to embrace their own transience, and marvel at how much can be packed into just one life. ■

Dieter Imboden, *Zugefallen – Ein Leben zwischen Menschen, Wissenschaft und Umwelt*, Zytglogge Verlag, 2020.

An ambassador for German scholarship.

Thomas Maissen studied history, Latin and philosophy at the University of Basel, where he received his doctorate in 1993. He has been a professor at the University of Heidelberg since 2004 and Director of the German Historical Institute in Paris since 2013.

When I finished university, why did I not stay in beautiful Basel, like most of my friends, where I could spend the summer drifting down the stream? Instead my wife and I did the one thing you should never do: Because of her job, we moved to beautiful Zurich, of all places, where I wrote my postdoctoral thesis and many historical articles for the “Neue Zürcher Zeitung”. Someone who is prepared to abandon Basel for Zurich must be capable of anything – and so it was that in 2004 we answered the call to move to beautiful Heidelberg. When our four children heard about the plan, they burned a German flag in our garden. In 2013, they were again unimpressed when we decamped to beautiful Paris. Now they are all at university – in Germany.

It is this Germany that I now represent at the German Historical Institute in Paris (DHIP), with just under 40 other colleagues. Like its sister institutes in London (1976), Washington (1987), Warsaw (1993) and Moscow (2005), the Paris institute, established in 1958, has its roots in the politics of reconciliation following World War II. The idea was that historical research in and with these states should create a new basis for shared understanding. Initially this was achieved by focusing on medieval topics, rather than the controversial area of contemporary history. However, the hosting of a major international conference at the DHIP and in Versailles to mark the 100th anniversary of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 shows just

how much common ground has been built up within scholarship and between researchers over recent decades, not just on methodology but in terms of their findings. Collaborations of this kind have become a matter of course normal and the fruits are reflected in the German-French History published by the DHIP, which will be completed shortly and consists of eleven volumes running from Charlemagne’s coronation as emperor up to the present day.

With its aim to bring historians together largely achieved, during my tenure the institute has placed a renewed focus on the internationalization of Germany’s humanities and social science sector, which is a policy priority for the German Federal Government. In concrete terms, this means that the institutes that make up the Max Weber Foundation are continuing with their previous bilateral mission but also becoming active in new regions. With German, French and Senegalese partners, we have established a joint research project in Dakar, to conclude in 2021. As part of this project, a dozen doctoral students and postdocs are studying the bureaucratization of African societies. Our focus will then shift to Ghana, where with the universities of Legon (Accra), Freiburg, Frankfurt and other partners we are setting up a Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa, which up to 2030 will be dedicated to the topic of sustainability. So if you do leave Basel, you may find a wealth of exciting things to discover in beautiful Africa. ■



A Basel historian in Paris: Thomas Maissen.