

MOVERS

Daniel Zajfman, president, Weizmann Institute of Science, Rehovot, Israel



2005–06: Director, Max Planck Institute of Nuclear Physics, Heidelberg, Germany
1997–present: Associate then full professor, Department of Particle Physics, Weizmann Institute of Science, Rehovot, Israel
1991–97: Senior scientist, Department of Particle Physics, Weizmann Institute of Science

Daniel Zajfman had a simple motivation when he enrolled in physics in 1979 at the Technion, Israel Institute of Technology: a desire to understand nature. He has followed that ambition throughout an accomplished career.

In December, Zajfman became the tenth president of Israel's Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot. He lauds the frequent interactions between theoretical and experimental physics at the institute — one of its trademarks. Now he hopes to encourage interactions among other fields as well, such as biology and biochemistry. Zajfman says he would consider regrouping researchers into interdisciplinary departments.

Born in Belgium in 1959, Zajfman moved to Israel at the age of 20. In 1989 he received his PhD in atomic physics from the Technion, then spent two years as a postdoctoral fellow at the Argonne National Laboratory near Chicago. When he returned to Israel in 1991, he joined Weizmann's department of particle physics as a senior scientist.

Zajfman also has strong ties with Germany. Since 2001 he has been an external member of the Max Planck Institute of Nuclear Physics in Heidelberg, where he was appointed a director in 2005. He found that science was an excellent means of overcoming political tensions among Israelis and Germans. "The diplomatic story between Israel and Germany started with scientists," he says.

The Weizmann Institute has no problem recruiting graduate students, says Zajfman, although political instability has made it more difficult to attract foreign postdocs. He believes there is a widespread misconception about life in Israel. "Some people think it's a third-world country," he says. The political situation does, however, make life more complicated. "You organize an international conference with 200 scientists in Eilat," says Zajfman, "then a bomb explodes in Jerusalem, which is 300 kilometres away, and the whole conference is cancelled."

Zajfman will face other challenges, says Andreas Wolf of the Max Planck Institute of Nuclear Physics. "He undertakes the task of ensuring further funding of the Weizmann Institute," says Wolf, noting that private financing plays a big role there. One of Zajfman's biggest challenges will be communicating the ideas behind the science.

At 47, Zajfman is the youngest president in Weizmann's 60-year history. He laments that he'll have less time for science and for his students, but he won't stop his research altogether. Exploring nature remains his primary passion. ■
Nora Eichinger

NETWORKS & SUPPORT

Seeking a PhD abroad

Although many budding scientists get international experience as part of their postdoc, acquiring international exposure during one's PhD is less common. But it can be just as rewarding.

I'm in the final year of my PhD course in experimental condensed-matter physics, studying magnetism using a technique called neutron scattering. The PhD programme is based at Loughborough University, UK, but a big part of my experimental work is at the Max Planck Institute for Solid State Research in Stuttgart, Germany. Coming from England just after my bachelor's degree in physics was a big step and somewhat risky, both personally and professionally. I wasn't sure it would help my career or suit my personal style. I was faced with a number of questions. Should I stay for further PhD study at my home institution? What topic will help me pave the desired career path? If I do go abroad, where to?

My supervisors, one in England and one in Germany, gave me the freedom to pick research topics and carry out my research at another institute. I was excited about going to the Max Planck Institute, which has people from more than 35 different countries at the PhD and postdoc level.

Once the long road of the PhD

is complete, I hope to have the confidence to compete in an increasingly multinational field in order to secure postdoc positions. Although moving abroad means reduced contact with my home university and research community, attending conferences on neutron scattering in Britain has helped me network and develop a sense of the community.

It took some time to settle down, find an apartment and get used to the local life, surroundings and a different language. In the lab, a simple task such as ordering helium for my experiments is complicated by the language barrier. In a few cases, this meant accidentally ordering extra tanks of the stuff.

Still, with persistence, it's been a rewarding and enriching experience both personally and professionally. The Max Planck Institute provides not only a stimulating environment, but ample funding that has helped boost the output of my research considerably. I have access to equipment and resources hard to find at many institutions.

Thus far, I have no regrets. Doing a PhD abroad has improved my knowledge of physics and clarified my career aspirations. ■

Michael Banks is a PhD student at the Max Planck Institute for Solid State Research in Stuttgart, Germany.

POSTDOC JOURNAL

Making a difference

So, what's next? So simple a sentence, and yet perhaps the most terrifying question in the English language for students nearing the end of their doctorate. Should I do a postdoc? The guilt sets in. Didn't we all tell our graduate-school admissions committees that we were planning careers in academia? Aren't we newly minted PhDs now supposed to be aiming for that coveted assistant professorship? There, but for the long and treacherous postdoctoral road, I go.

And yet, against all my best intentions, I'm on that very road. If you'd told me two years ago, in the midst of my mid-PhD slump, that I'd be continuing in research through a postdoc, I would have laughed, and then cried, and then quit and returned to my native Australia. What went wrong?

I'll tell you — it's the allure of making a difference. I hoped to do so with my doctorate on cardiac arrhythmias, but I foresee only incremental improvements to existing therapies. Now I'm switching fields completely, researching nutrition and human body composition regulation, partly because addressing malnutrition and obesity promises to mitigate global public-health problems.

So, I'm giving myself two years, three at the most, to determine whether I can indeed make a palpable difference. Will my published articles effect change? Will mixing with experts excite me? Will my work have public-policy implications? ■

Peter Jordan is a first-year visiting fellow at the National Institute of Diabetes & Digestive & Kidney Diseases in Bethesda, Maryland.