

Alumni at work: Barbara Piatti

Between literature and geography.

Interview: Bettina Volz-Tobler

Dr. Barbara Piatti mediates between academia and the public. She manages and develops interdisciplinary and cultural history projects, creating formats ranging from books to digital portals, festivals to audio dramas and staged walks – both on her own initiative and on behalf of official bodies, institutions and businesses.



Barbara Piatti

UNI NOVA: Dr. Piatti, you studied German, philosophy and art history at the University of Basel and have become a versatile cultural mediator. What were your most important takeaways from your studies?

BARBARA PIATTI: Independence: finding niches, trusting in my own ideas rather than constantly following “trends”. Some people in my field were skeptical when I decided to focus on literary geography in my studies and my doctoral dissertation.

It seemed a somewhat esoteric topic that always had to be explained. Today, literary geography is established in the German-speaking regions, too. There are even reference books and textbooks.

UNI NOVA: What is the central idea that connects all your projects and activities?

PIATTI: Telling the best stories possible! As an author, I often grant myself the freedom to invent, to set the scene – following detailed background research, of course, and imagining how things might have been. I’m fascinated by the semi-fictional.

UNI NOVA: In a way, you feel at home in all media that promote culture and history education, and are also involved in various e-projects, such as a walk through the town of Laufen that almost feels like an audio drama. How did this project come about?

PIATTI: The idea came from the Emil and Rosa Richterich-Beck Foundation, who wanted to present Laufen, which is located by the River Birs, – as a historical echo chamber: I was commissioned to develop ten characters and make them “speak” – from a Neolithic Age woman to a medieval builder, a 17th-century merce-

nary and a market vendor in the interwar period. Character portraits are displayed on house walls and the audio dramas can be accessed via QR codes. I created something similar for Pfeffingen Castle together with Reto Marti, who runs “Archäologie Baselland” – the eight listening stations were opened in September and include impressive graphics.

UNI NOVA: What projects have you got planned next?

PIATTI: A large non-fiction book about the Alps for children, which I am writing together with Thomas Streifeneder, an economic geographer from Eurac Research in South Tyrol. We are also collaborating on a research project entitled “Rural Criticism”, in which we focus on the rapid transformation processes in rural areas and examine how these are portrayed and interpreted by literature. Then I have another book project on the cultural history of cooperative living spanning around 100 years. This will zoom in on people’s everyday lives, so it will also be highly narrative. And for 2021/22, we – that is the “Celestino Piatti – The Visual Legacy” association – are planning books and events to mark the 100th birthday of my father, who was an internationally renowned graphic artist and illustrator. ■

barbara-piatti.ch

Alumni Prize

Signs of increasing appeal.

Text: Bettina Volz,
director of Alumni-
Basel.

The Alumni Prize was launched in 2015, the 10th anniversary of AlumniBasel. It is endowed with a CHF 10,000 prize by an alumnus and patron and aims to show the many ways in which University of Basel alumni go on to enrich society after completing their studies.

When AlumniBasel was set up in 2005 by the President's Office and Senate, the topic of alumni was relatively unknown in Switzerland – in contrast to Anglo-Saxon areas, where organizations for former students have been an integral part of universities for over 100 years. Would this work in Switzerland, where the higher education system has a completely different structure? The idea of following Harvard's example and tapping wealthy alumni to fill the university's coffers was extremely enticing but – as quickly became clear – nothing but a pipe dream. Admittedly, AlumniBasel didn't get off to an easy start. Initial attempts to arrange large, cross-faculty events like the successes of ETH Zurich (Homecoming Day) and the University of St. Gallen (Alumni Ball) turned out to be hasty. The event programs may have been attractive, but in a city like Basel with a disproportionate number of events for its size, attendance simply wasn't good enough.

Starting small

Smaller events did prove successful, such as the general assembly and the increasingly popular fall event, which focuses on university policy issues and has been held since 2010 in collaboration with the Frei-

willige Akademische Gesellschaft (FAG) and the Förderverein Universität Basel. These occasions have allowed alumni to slowly but surely make themselves known and increase their visibility.

Yet AlumniBasel still lacked a glamorous event to show how important alumni can be for the University of Basel. The idea of an Alumni Prize was developed to boost its profile and raise awareness. This was to be presented during the Dies academicus, the University of Basel's biggest annual celebration. Here too, various obstacles had to be overcome. After taking office as President in 2015, Professor Andrea Schenker-Wicki allowed the first Alumni Prize to be awarded at the Dies academicus, and for that we thank her. The five alumni who have received the prize in the intervening years show that the University of Basel can certainly hold its own in the top academic leagues. They have made a far-reaching impact in a wide variety of fields and have helped the University of Basel to national and international acclaim. The Alumni Prize is a way of promoting their achievements.

Education and loyalty

AlumniBasel membership has increased significantly since 2005 and there are currently around 6,000 active members. The growth of the specialist alumni groups ("Fachalumni") is particularly pleasing. Now numbering 14, these groups have been consistently founded by younger alumni who get involved for two main reasons: they recognize the value of networks and wish to express their pride as University of Basel alumni. The new specialist alumni groups are actively supported by the teaching staff, establishing a much more intensive connection between alumni, students and lecturers.

And so we come full circle, culminating in the Alumni Prize: the education students enjoy, the loyalty they develop – and the fact that graduates are viewed positively and seen as relevant in the university's social environment – encourage alumni to actively identify with the University of Basel. ■

alumnibasel.ch/de/netzwerk/alumni-preis

Alumni travels

A fascination with the sea.

Anyone who studies biology at the University of Basel will be well aware of the marine biology excursion to Erquy, on the Atlantic coast of Brittany. In May 2021, AlumniBasel will organize a similar trip, led by Dr. Thomas Jermann, who has spent years exploring the area with students – besides publishing the book *Etudes Marines* with the small publishing house Du & Ich in Basel. For over 30 years, the marine biologist has photographed the intertidal zone – the magical area between sea and land (cf. UNI NOVA 128, November 2016). ■

Microworlds

Special issue stamps by a Basel alumnus.



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In March 2020, molecular biologist Dr. Martin Oeggerli, a University of Basel alumnus, created two special issue stamps for Swiss Post. Oeggerli uses a scanning electron microscope to photograph minuscule scenes from the natural world, before lovingly coloring the black and white originals in exquisite detail. The results of his labors are precise, colorful and large-format depictions of an exotic and largely unknown micro-world that are published in prestigious journals and exhibited internationally. The one-franc special issue stamp shows a rose petal, while the second stamp, worth 85 rappen, features minute pollen grains of the forget-me-not.

Oeggerli studied at the University of Basel from 1994 to 2000, and went on to earn a doctorate in molecular biology in 2005. He has since made a name for himself with his striking illustrations of scientific phenomena, published under the pseudonym Micronaut. “It was only when I realized that they were to be found on the scale of bacteria that I was able to image the smallest pollen grains in the world,” says the researcher, artist and recipient of numerous awards. ■

Start-up

Artidis on the road to success.

Alumnus Tobias Appenzeller, who studied nanoscience at the University of Basel, is the founder and current president of the alumni association Nano. Professionally, he is employed as Head of Quality and Clinical Operations at the start-up Artidis, which he also co-founded. The company recently announced the successful completion of the clinical study “Nano”, assessing the usefulness and sensitivity of a nanomechanical biomarker it developed for breast cancer diagnosis. The study was carried out at the Breast Center of University Hospital Basel and Basel University’s Biozentrum.

The Basel-based health tech company developed the first nanomechanical biomarker for cancer diagnosis and therapy optimization. The Artidis nanotechnology platform combines biomechanical data with other clinical parameters in the Artidis-Net platform, allowing the creation of a personalized prognosis for the disease’s progression, shortening the delay between biopsy and diagnosis to just a few hours. ■

AlumniActuarialScience

Honorary membership for Herbert Lüthy.

As a sign of gratitude and in recognition of his achievements, AlumniActuarialScience made Professor Herbert Lüthy an honorary member of the association at this year’s reunion. For many years, Lüthy was a highly influential figure in Switzerland’s insurance industry. After holding management positions at Basler Versicherungen and Swiss Re, he served as director of the Federal Office of Private Insurance. In a short time, he established a stable and enduring framework for Swiss insurance companies in the form of the revised Insurance Supervision Act and the Swiss Solvency Test. Alongside his professional career, Lüthy taught at the Actuarial Department of the University of Basel’s Institute of Mathematics from 1989 to 2012. Above and beyond his teaching obligations, he worked tirelessly to expand the program of studies. For instance, under his direction, the *Diplom* degree program in actuarial science transitioned into the master’s program of the same name. ■

Global challenges and the coronavirus crisis.

Pascale Baeriswyl studied law, history and French literature and linguistics at the University of Basel. She has previously worked as a researcher and served as an ordinary judge at the Basel Civil Court. In 2000, she joined the Swiss diplomatic service, holding various posts including at the embassy in Hanoi, the Swiss mission to the EU in Brussels and the UN in New York. In 2016, she was appointed Switzerland's first female state secretary and chief diplomat. She has been an ambassador to the UN in New York since June 2020.

On 26 June 1945, the United Nations Charter was signed by 50 nations in San Francisco. It took two months of negotiations involving 850 delegates before the visionary document could be unanimously adopted. 75 years later to the day I was confirmed as Switzerland's Permanent Representative to the UN – in a virtual ceremony, as New York is currently in a state of emergency due to the coronavirus pandemic. Thousands of people have lost their lives here, while the economic and social consequences of the crisis are still impossible to gauge. The crisis mode that shapes our daily working life mirrors the global challenges we wrestle with every day in our debates.

How do I and my 40-strong team represent Switzerland on the bank of the East River in these peculiar times? Churchill once quipped that “the United Nations was set up not to get us to heaven, but only to save us from hell.” I might put it more prosaically: the UN, with its 193 member states, is the world's most universal organization. Its headquarters are a place where all state actors – and many others – have the opportunity to discuss crisis prevention, speak on behalf of people in need or develop global standards. However much the end of multilateralism is invoked or overstated, the fact remains that this is a place where countless people and topics converge. In times of polarization, compromise can be hard to come by. As a result of Switzerland's culture of dia-

logue, we are often called upon as bridge builders. It is also in our own interest to play this part; as a global export nation with a humanitarian tradition, we depend on carefully calibrated power dynamics.

How do we make a difference in concrete terms? With regard to development, as a contributor to the United Nations budget we play a part in shaping how the UN provides local assistance, for instance in the wake of the recent explosion in Beirut. In July, I was elected vice-president of the Economic and Social Council, which is working to mitigate the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. Its efforts are guided by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which also provides a roadmap to tackle the climate crisis. When it comes to human rights, one of our key priorities is promoting women's rights. And for 2023/24, the Swiss Federal Council has applied for a place on the UN Security Council, invoking our tradition of peacebuilding. So far, our bid to join the council is uncontested. It means that we are further strengthening our efforts toward peace and security.

“The city that never sleeps” has been hit hard by the crisis. There is little sense of *gemütlichkeit* in the global village right now. Nevertheless, we are deeply moved by the resilience and solidarity on display. It is this *esprit* that we would like to take with us to the UN in order to face up to the challenges ahead of us shoulder to shoulder. ■



Switzerland's ambassador to the UN:
Pascale Baeriswyl before a New York cityscape.