

# Interview Sibylle von Oppeln-Bronikowski<sup>1</sup>

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Sibylle von Oppeln-Bronikowski

Sibylle von Oppeln-Bronikowski served as an Executive Committee member of IAOS between 2015 and 2017. As of June 2019, she will be retiring as the Director of the Department of “Strategy and Planning, International Relations, Research and Communication,” at Statistisches Bundesamt – Germany’s Federal Statistical Office – shorthanded as Destatis.

In this interview, we will learn about how Sibylle became interested in statistics and how she entered the world of official statistics, as well as learn about her experiences during the transformation of Germany’s Federal Statistical Office with the re-unification of Germany in October 1990. In addition, we will learn about

Sibylle’s efforts to make Destatis the first official institution in Germany with an internet offering.

This interview took place over the phone between Sibylle and Katherine Condon on February 1, 2019.

**INTERVIEWER: Thank you so much for allowing us to interview you. Let us start at the very beginning and go back to your childhood. I know that there have been some political changes, most recently with the unification of Germany, so where in Germany did you grow up? What was it like growing up in your country?**

I grew up in a large family – I was one of 7 children. We lived in southern Germany during the post-war-time, in the region of Swabia.<sup>2</sup>

My parents fled Berlin during the world war. So, they were not born in the south but that’s where I grew up. During the post-war time it was not so easy for us to live as a big family.

My father was trained as a physicist. However, after the war, it was difficult for him to do his job, because he lost his papers during the world war. So, he decided to become a teacher of English and mathematics. On the other hand, my mother was an author. She wrote lyrics, novels, and so on.

I’d like to also tell you that the time was marked by a general insecurity after the world war. Many people had to leave their former homeland, especially from East Germany, and the fear of a new war was always present.

<sup>1</sup>The views and opinions expressed in the conversation are those of the interviewee and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of the Statistical Journal of the International Association for Official Statistics, nor IOS Press.

<sup>2</sup>For more information on Swabia region of Germany, see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swabia>.

However, at the same time, we had also something that was very good for all the people. We had a kind of equality between the people. There was also a mood of optimism and it was often because everybody wanted to get rid of their bad experiences and wanted to fill the cities again. Nobody had a lot of money, so everybody helped out. There was a great solidarity. It was also true because we did not have all the devices we have today – we had no telephones, no TV, no washing machines, no dishwasher – so everybody had to do everything. It wasn't easy at times, but everybody helped a little bit as we were all in the same boat.

**INTERVIEWER: Before we turn to the questions on education, I want to ask about where you fall as one of seven children. Are you in the middle or one of the older or one of the younger of the seven siblings?**

I'm in the middle. There is very nice architecture. I have four older siblings, and they are very close to each other in age. After me, there are two younger siblings.

While my parents are no longer living anymore, I am a little bit of an anchor in the middle of the family. Overall, we have a very good relationship altogether. So, that is nice.

**INTERVIEWER: So, back to our pre-arranged questions, what was your education like, before university? Did you focus on mathematics, or something else? Could you tell me a little bit about the German education system – what was that like when you were growing up?**

Yes, I had a typical German education career from grade one to grade four, that is from age six to age 10 years. I attended the elementary school with subjects that are all the same. Afterwards, the German education system has a three-tiered school system, which means that a student goes to one of three types of school: Gymnasium, Realschule, and Hauptschule. This is determined after the fourth grade, with the exception of comprehensives schools.

It was really strict. When a child's parents were academic, the parents tried to make this path available for their children. While if a child's parents were, say "blue collar," then the parents did not mind about it. What the criteria was for deciding wasn't talked about in the family. So, for me, it was because my average at

that time was pretty high and it was pretty clear to me that I had to go further in my studies, likewise for my siblings. Thus, after the 4<sup>th</sup> grade I attended Gymnasium (secondary school) and left it after the 13<sup>th</sup> grade with the "Abitur," that is a graduation for university study.

[Sibylle commented here that she personally regretted that such an important determination of a person's educational pathways came so early in one's childhood.]

**INTERVIEWER: Looking back to our childhoods, we often find that a particular event or person had an impact on our later years. Did a particular person or event shape you into the person you are today?**

No, I would say my father shaped me a lot to the person I am today. He was a very clear-thinking, honest, rule-oriented straight-lined, and open-minded person. All at the same time. While the impact of my mother was quite the reverse. She was an artist and did not respect too much the rules. And she encouraged me to act in the theatre and read sophisticated literature. So, for example, I read the Greek legends at the age of 10 and I read Sartre, as well as a member of a literary club at the age of 13.

My mother did not accept that I read any bad literature at all. Bad literature, for her, was already literature for a young girl. Oh, and comics were COMPLETELY unacceptable [laughter].

Overall, my parents' influence was a kind of interplay and I was just in-between these two influences.

**INTERVIEWER: Problem solving takes both strict rules, as well as looking at a problem with creativity.**

Yes, that pretty much is it – to bring ideas from outside into statistics and as you will see later, that this is the way I went through things all my life.

**INTERVIEWER: Then you took your training in economics? Where did you get your economics training? How did that come about? And, was there a particular individual professor that inspired you into that area of economics? and how did you transition into official statistics?**

That is very interesting question [laughter]. But, I had a teacher and this teacher was very conservative

but he always challenged me. I liked the discussions with him, and he often said, “You have no idea and no knowledge of economics.” So, I decided to study economics. I was really embarrassed by his judgement [laughter].

And, then I had a very good professor in statistics [Rolf Wagenführ]. He played a major role in developing economic statistics and had a lot of practical knowledge. He was [also] the first Director General of today’s European Statistical Office (Eurostat).<sup>3</sup> He was very committed to its establishment. So, he was really famous. He looked a lot like Churchill who was very popular at the time. He smoked a cigar, even in the classroom [laughter]. He often quoted from the book title “How to Lie with Statistics”, which I still own.

I think the first lecture I attended by him, he said “You have to read this otherwise you cannot understand anything about statistics.” And after a while there were so many students [attending his lectures] that he needed more assistance. I was very keen that I wanted to be one of his assistants from the very beginning. And so, I had to REALLY learn statistics. I became one of his assistants. After this time and experience it was clear to me that I would go professionally into official statistics.

**INTERVIEWER: Turning to your career in statistics, and remembering back to when you were completing your education, what did you hope to accomplish and what were your aspirations in your professional life?**

What is very dear to my heart. I have always been convinced that a good and stable democracy needs reliable statistics. So, I hoped from the beginning that I could help shape this. This is really the “red-line” of my career. In my professional life, it has always been very important to me to stand up for ethical principles and values of official statistics. And, it’s part of my genes, I stand up for this and I did it all the time. I fight for these values.

**INTERVIEWER: You began your professional career at Federal Statistical Office in Wiesbaden, Germany – or Destatis in 1980 and have worked there throughout your career in several positions. You started out as a member of the Scientific Staff. What did you see as your greatest satisfaction? Is**

<sup>3</sup>For more information on the European Statistical Office (Eurostat), see: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eurostat#History>.

**there any one project while you were in this position that you feel you will be able to look back on and say that it was your favorite project?**

I had a lot of favorite projects but the one which I’m really proud of because of the process and the results is that I was project manager for the introduction of our first public internet access – that is when our institution went online.

The first idea I got in 1994. I wrote a draft of the project for the introduction of an internet offer. I took it to our vice president at that time. I said, “Okay, I have an idea and I would want to realize that in three months” [Laughter]. This was really the first time we did this and we had no plan, . . . not a clue. We just knew by students – because in that time we participated in in fairs, such as CeBIT,<sup>4</sup> where we were asked by students, among other things, why our data offerings were not available online.

So, I took the chance and wrote down what I wanted to offer in one little page. It was accepted and I was appointed as the project leader to start this endeavor. I put together a team at very short notice. Our team was accommodated in a large office or what we called a laboratory. The priority task was to acquire a lot of knowledge from specialist books in a short time and to develop a suitable concept for the introduction of an internet offering within three months.

The team was interdisciplinary. They had different knowledge skills, and they had to fight through their way. They had to decide how they would accomplish the task in the given time. They really looked for books. Remember there was not internet to look through different books on how to program this type of thing. I had them put some PC devices together. Our concept was short and simple. From the very beginning, we focused on two languages – German and English – and those pillars still exist today. We were the first official institution in Germany with an internet offering. In addition, a flat hierarchy was important to me with regard to the organization of the team. In retrospect, I would call this a key factor – nowadays, it would be identified as “scrum methods.” This was 20-years ago.

At the next CeBIT conference, we were there with a very early stage of our data online. It went over well

<sup>4</sup>CeBIT stands for in German – Centrum für Büroautomation, Informationstechnologie und Telekommunikation, it was the largest and most internationally representative computer expo and is held annually on the Hanover fairgrounds. For more information see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CeBIT>.

and it was a very good feeling. A small group of people to make this idea happen and to realize it in three months. This was incredible.

**INTERVIEWER: Before we go on to talk further about your career at Destatis, could you give us a little bit of background of the history of official statistics in Germany?**

Yes. After the Second World War, official statistics was not a system anymore and did not exist. Unlike other political institutes at the beginning, statistics was not a high priority. Germany was split into different military sectors and the different sectors tried to do statistics separately. So, we had an American sector that had a small office here in Hesse. They did some statistics, which were important for post-war time starting in 1948. Mostly the statistics focused on operations, such as: how many machines have we built? However, all in all, it was a very small amount of statistics. This was just in the American sector. However, based on this, it was decided to establish a new office in Wiesbaden for the Federal Republic after a while – and this is “headquarters” today.<sup>5</sup> Because it came out of this, our headquarters were not in Berlin. According to the federal system of the Federal Republic of Germany, 11 regional offices (offices of the Länder) and one federal office were founded. [Sibylle stressed that the Federal Statistical Office has no directives to the Länder offices.]

In East Germany – the former GDR – the system was quite different. [East Germany] was a socialist planned economic, and thus there were no market prices. The official statistics were collected by the Central Statistical Office, and it was well organized and centralized. There was only one office.

After the reunification, that is with the fall of the Berlin Wall, it was a great challenge to transfer the statistical system of the GDR to the free market economy of the Federal Republic of Germany. In each of the new federal states, a separate regional statistical Office was opened – that is 11 regional statistical offices on the western side of the wall, while on the eastern side of the wall there was only one office. It was quite challenging to bring those systems together.

<sup>5</sup>More information regarding Destatis, officially: *Statistisches Bundesamt* – Germany’s Federal Statistical Office – can be found at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal\\_Statistical\\_Office\\_of\\_Germany](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_Statistical_Office_of_Germany).

During this time, I was partly working in Berlin. My responsibility was to set up a new Library and a Documentation System, which enabled digital data archiving and in which a huge amount of documentary were to be integrated. The project was partly financed by the EU. The modern unified library later became our information point, or i-Punkt in Berlin, and the data-shop for Europe.

As for the integration of East German statistical system, their statistical system was built like a football field full of paper and what I did then, was to archive it. Cataloging each piece of paper in their statistical system into an IP system.

**INTERVIEWER: That sounds like a monumental feat...**

Not really. While they had a completely different system, we still needed to integrate the two systems, [putting the East German system into the statistical system of the west.]

At that time what I did nobody was interested in. They just wanted to keep it away or to trash it. I considered by myself, “No, I think in maybe 50 years or so, people will be very interested to see all these documents.” And therefore, I did this cataloging with my team. We got some money from from the EU fund. That was a very good and inventive time for us.

Since we have this wonderful modern Library in Berlin, another idea turned up: Because our headquarters in Wiesbaden were too far away from the political market, why not building a contact unit in Berlin. So we did – and I am still proud of the idea.

In our days we have an Information Point in Berlin and a unit within the Parliament building. Our staff there is successfully bridging the Parliament and the so called political Berlin.

**INTERVIEWER: Well, so turning back to your experiences after several years as a member of the scientific staff, you then became the head of the unit of data banks, user services unit and moving on to higher levels of management positions to your current position as director the department of strategy and planning, international relations, research and communication. That’s a lot of stuff. [Laughter]. With this transition from staff member to management, what do you see as your greatest satisfaction in these high-level management positions?**

Well, it is very satisfying for me to work in an international environment. I have had very good experiences working with other institutions and offices, where know-how and solutions for difficult challenges were exchanged collegially according to the motto, “A problem shared is a problem halved; a joy shared, is a joy doubled!”

What I always like in the international statistical community is that the collaboration is so good. You can even incorporate ideas from others. You can develop things and when others incorporate your “things” then one is so proud.

You don’t have competition, but you have more collaboration. Others will incorporate, or take in to his/her program and develop your idea further and so on. This is very good. This is what I really like throughout my career, as well as in my management positions. I have had more opportunities for this in my management positions. The more opportunities to go to conferences and exchange ideas with other colleagues.

**INTERVIEW: Yes, I too like that ability to exchange ideas with other colleagues. That’s one reason I love going to conferences to hear what other people have to say and what their experiences are. That was very evident at the IAOS conference in September [2018] in Paris.**

Also, what I like is to be more of a coach for my staff.

I have a small support role and with all my experiences, I can do that. I can create it to support others. To help other companies and young staff members to develop their own possibilities or their potential.

They all aspire to these higher positions because they often had a break in their career. I too had a break in my career at one time and so, I know how it is. Many young women, these days, think they have to wait, wait, wait, after they are finished with their family. However, I say “No” – that’s not true.

I was a kind of pioneer. What it means to be the first after a long time they had – no woman – in the director hierarchy. And, for me it was not so easy at the very beginning because everybody I saw looked at me twice. I encouraged other women to follow me and now we are really in a good position. We more female directors [laughter] for the time being.

It is not because I think we need only women “Diversity” is the right term. I like very much mixed teams. But, if there are no women around, I feel also uncomfortable and I would to change this and ask “Why is this?”

**INTERVIEWER: Starting in 1985, your biography states that you have had done training and other experiences in specific regions of the world. Your first experience outside of Germany was in Liberia doing a 4-week training course with the Ministry of Planning. How did that come about?**

First of all, [as you can tell], I like to share my knowledge with other people.

[With regard to this first experience outside of Germany in Liberia], it was an interesting offer. The training took place within the premise of the German Development Assistance Program and at that time I worked as a chief trainer, just dealing with computers at the very beginning of the usage of computers in statistics. I must say because it was also in the 80’s. I fell in love with Africa and I thought it had interesting and nice people and so I was really pleased to be there.

[Later, I worked on the EU-funded PHARE and TACIS training programs with Statistical Offices of Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States. Further on with the National Statistical Bureau of China under a bilateral cooperation based on a memorandum of understanding.]

All commitments mentioned took place within the framework of German international cooperation. In addition to the cooperation agreements with the new member states of the EU, German foreign policy/support policy focused on the successor states of the Soviet Union and on China. As a country which itself underwent a transformation process as a result of reunification, we provided special assistance to these countries. I was involved in, more or less, all of the programs because all these countries wanted to know a little bit more about dissemination. I worked in this area at that time and I was responsible for dissemination and publications.

**INTERVIEWER: And what would you say is your greatest satisfaction in terms of the consultation and memorandum of agreement work that you have done?**

I would like to say that collaboration with new partners is always hard work at the beginning and it takes time and empathy to understand the needs and to develop a mutual basic trust.

And, . . . at the beginning you always think you can’t do it; that it isn’t possible to whatever the project is. But, in the end you find a way as you are really com-

mitted to finding that solution. That at the end it turns out to be very successful. What is important is that you try to find a way to understand and to listen and not to say “Look, we are the Germans and we want to teach you from our system” or something like that.

All countries are different. They have a different background and not one size or way fits all. And to get that throughout is important. It is essential that you have the professional competencies, but you also need that your partners see that you have the best intentions. That means that you don’t just want to earn money, and you also want them to see that you have empathy with them. So, we understand each other a little bit better together.

**INTERVIEWER: So, another piece of your international experiences is with regard to the World Bank financed twinning project with Mongolia and Kazakhstan. I had to do a little bit of investigating on what this twinning project was, but could you speak on your experience?**

Yes. The twin instrument is a very successful instrument. That means that we are not teachers to another institution, but that it is an institution-to-institution relationship, a mutual relationship and we are on the same level. The aim is to move statistical offices and the national statistics system of the partner country towards international standards that correspond with the fundamental principles of the UN, the code of principles of Eurostat in Europe. This is one thing. The other thing is that you never do it all alone and that you have a consortium. That you don’t do what I said earlier – thinking that your system is the best and only way to do things. Because obviously, every country has a little bit different system and then you can find out what is best for the country you have a training relationship with.

That you decide things together is better and it is itself holistic. That means it is not only that you say “Okay, let’s go for the price statistic that helps them to find best practices,” but that means we want to shape a modern statistical office which is built on the fundamental principles and on the [in-house, in-country] talent and so on.

When we signed the contract we thought, “Oh, my god, what have we done?” [laughter] To me and our colleagues in my office at the beginning, they were really sometimes curious because they said, “Okay, we cannot show them all this and build all these expecta-

tions. We have our own work to do.” In addition, what’s important is that we do not send newcomers to them, but experienced people. Because it has nothing to do with earning money in a quick way but that it will be something which is sustainable. I think, at the end, it was really very successful and we were rewarded – the World Bank said it was the best project. That made it all the better.

**INTERVIEWER: I see that you will be retiring shortly from your Destatis, and looking back on your 39 years, what do you see as your greatest accomplishment and satisfaction while at Destatis?**

Yeah, I always enjoyed working at Destatis and I had different opportunities for cooperation with various regions, national offices, international institutions for feedback. So, the next role of different people and the observance of ethical principles has always been very important to me. I have always felt comfortable when the focus was on collaboration and not competitive thinking.

In addition, over time the expertise of colleagues has grown and then also confidence for the future. I have confidence for the future that it will continue for other people. They will follow this path and that the goal for the future will be to grow, as it has been for myself [laughter].

**INTERVIEWER: Turning to your involvement with IAOS. Between 2015 and 2017, you were a member of the executive committee of IAOS. How did you become involved with the organization and what do you see as your greatest satisfaction as an executive committee member?**

Well, in my time I have participated in many ISI conferences.<sup>6</sup> I was a member of the organizing committee of the ISI conference in Berlin 2003.

As an elected member in the ISI, I came in contact with IAOS and I think the greatest satisfaction was the cooperation with Ms. Ola Awad, Director General – National Statistical Institute of Palestine. It was a great pleasure working together with her, she is a very inspiring woman for me. In particular, a highlight was

<sup>6</sup>ISI – International Statistical Institute – for more information, see <https://www.isi-web.org/>.

the opportunity to give a presentation in Palestine on the occasion of the World Statistics Day.

For the last IAOS conference held in September 2018 in Paris, I was a member of the scientific committee. This was a very nice task for me. There were many small parts of the program that were worked on in order to create a suitable overall program.

**INTERVIEWER: How do you see IAOS can have an impact on official statistics?**

It is very important to me that IAOS is committed to and represents ethical principles and values in statistics worldwide. I think it is not only in the subject matter, but also the process . . . in the fulfillment of the value of an ethical principle.

**INTERVIEWER: Do you have any words of wisdom, or lessons learned that you would like to provide, and overall, what are some of the challenges you see facing statisticians working in government settings today?**

Financing [our official statistics office] has always been a challenge. This goes hand-in-hand with the never-ending stories of no priority setting [laughter]. Keeping everything on top. I mean it is always the most comfortable way for customers or for politicians to put new tasks on our shoulders and never lighten up some heavy duties.

It is common saying, nowadays, that data is the oil – or fuel – of nowadays. However, isn't it a bit strange that society is not willing to pay a good price for it?

**INTERVIEWER: Do you think the field of statistics has changed since you received your education? If no, what has sustained it; and if yes, in what way has it changed?**

Everything keeps running faster and growing bigger and bigger. This is true for nearly everything, but not for the IT devices [laughter]. They are getting smaller and smaller. This is still a miracle to me that billions of data are stored on a chip smaller than a fingertip [laughter].

Years ago, we enjoyed and celebrated when we reached a step forward in a project, or that we had successfully reached our targets. Nowadays we have no

time for this kind of festival of celebrating anymore and that truly is a real pity. Celebrating one's successes is important. I feel that we have turned from hunters to being more like hunted deer.

One last sentence is that we need both – [speeding up and slowing down]. To make really sustainable decisions we need reasonable time, but sometimes we also need faster reactions to the changing environment. [To have that time to think about the organization, to strategize on how to go forward is critical, but we don't always have that time anymore to think critically, strategically going forward to sustain and improve.]

**INTERVIEWER: One last question, as we are running out of time [laughter], do you have any words of wisdom for student preparing for working in the world of official statistics?**

The world of statistics is interesting for me because it is a little bit like LEGO for my grandson.<sup>7</sup>

You can have a lot of pieces of information and you can build your own story out of the data. LEGO are, as we all know, a sustainable toy of high quality. Official statisticians have the corner stones in their hands on which democratic societies are built upon. They are essential to maintain the core values of high-quality statistics, objectivity, impartiality, and professional independence. I would suggest to all statisticians who enter or young scientists who enter the world of official statistics, to keep their eyes open and be keen enough to be critical.

That's it, that's my advice [laughter].

**INTERVIEWER: Thank you so much for talking with us and best of wishes for your next adventure in retirement.**

<sup>7</sup>“Legos” refers to a line of toys produced by the Lego Group consisting of interlocking plastic blocks. For more information see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Lego\\_Group](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Lego_Group).