CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

O. THEODOR BENFEY

Transcript of an Interview
Conducted by
James J. Bohning
at the
Chemical Heritage Foundation
on
24 May 1991 and 5 June 1991

With Subsequent Additions and Corrections
THE BECKMAN CENTER FOR THE HISTORY OF CHEMISTRY
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OTTO THEODOR BENFEY

1925  Born in Berlin, Germany on 31 October

Education

1945  B.Sc., chemistry, University College, London
1947  Ph.D., chemistry, Univeristy College, London

Professional Experience

1947-1948  London University Post-doctoral Traveling Fellow, Columbia University
           Haverford College,
           1948  Instructor of Chemistry
           1948-1955  Assistant professor of Chemistry
           1955-1956  Associate professor of Chemistry
           1955-1956  Harvard University, Research Fellow
           Earlham College
1956-1973  Associate professor of Chemistry and History of Science; Professor of Chemistry and
           History of Science
1971-1972  Chairman of Chemistry Department
           Guilford College
1973-1988  Dana Professor of Chemistry and History of Science
           periodically  Chairperson of Chemistry Department
           1977-1979  Clerk of Faculty
1985-1986  International Christian University, Mitaka, Tokyo, Japan, Visiting Professor of Chemistry and
           Research Fellow
           Chemical Heritage Foundation
1989-     Editor, Beckman Center News; Othmer Library News;
           University of Pennsylvania
           Chemical Heritage
1990-     Adjunct Professor, Department of History and
           Sociology of Science

Honors

1961  Doan Distinguished Teacher Travel Award,
       Earlham College
1967  Manufacturing Chemists Association Chemistry Teacher Award
1967-1968  Danforth Foundation E. Harris Harbison Award for Distinguished Teaching
1970-1971  Fulbright-Hays Faculty Research and Study Award,
           Kwansei Gakuin University, Nishinomiya, Japan
ABSTRACT

O. Theodor Benfey begins the interview with a description of his childhood in Germany during the rise of the Third Reich. He tells of his experiences in England, where he was a student during the war, and then his move to the United States for a postdoctoral fellowship at Columbia University. He describes the development of his interest in physical organic chemistry and structure, and the history of chemistry, and recounts his career as a professor of chemistry and history of science at Haverford, Earlham, and Guilford Colleges. Benfey also tells of his parallel career as a writer, translator and editor and gives details of the various translations he has published, and recalls his term as editor of Chemistry magazine. He concludes with his memories of his studies in Japan and China and his current interests.

INTERVIEWER

James J. Bohning, Assistant Director for Oral History at the Chemical Heritage Foundation holds the B.S., M.S., and Ph.D. degrees in chemistry. He was a member of the chemistry faculty at Wilkes University from 1959 until 1990, where he served as chair of the Chemistry Department for sixteen years, and chair of the Earth and Environmental Sciences Department for three years. He was Chair of the Division of the History of Chemistry of the American Chemical Society in 1986, and has been associated with the development and management of the Foundation’s oral history program since 1985.
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1. **Family, Childhood, and Early Education**
   Grows up as a Lutheran of Jewish ancestry in Germany during the rise of the Third Reich. Emigrates to England to live with the Mendl family and attend Watford Grammar School, while parents move to United States. Enjoys math classes, and interest in science develops.

11. **University College, London**
   Moves to Aberystwyth during war. Has some contact with Ingold during undergraduate years. Becomes a Quaker. Insists on conducting only non-war-related research as graduate student. Studies aliphatic substitution and solvent effects. Not encouraged to keep abreast of outside research.

27. **Postdoctoral Traveling Fellowship, Columbia University**
   Immigrates to United States, reunites with family. Studies mercury-catalyzed solvolysis and olefin formation. Considers switching to medicine.

35. **Haverford College**

45. **Harvard University**

51. **Earlham College**
   Continues bipyrididyl research. Works with Strong to develop new chemistry curriculum based on conceptual divisions and to create and publish Chemical Bond Approach materials. Edits Chemistry magazine. Continues publishing translations and history of chemistry. Becomes chair of HIST. Interest in geometry and structure increases. Professor of both chemistry and history of science.
Guilford College
Urged by Hobbs to join faculty. Educates many for industrial positions. Students able to cross-register with other Greensboro schools. Active interdepartmental faculty interaction. Dana Professor of chemistry and history of science.

Far Eastern Studies
Becomes interested in China and Japan while at Earlham. Studies Japanese and lives in Japan for a year to explore history of science in the Far East. Especially intrigued by uses of geometry in Eastern culture.

Early Retirement
Retires early to devote time to other interests. Becomes Editor at the Beckman Center for the History of Chemistry. Moves to Bryn Gweled.
NOTES


34. O. Theodor Benfey, J. R. Stanmyer, Jr., Barton Milligan, and E. W. Westhead Jr., "3,5-Dinitrobenzoates and Their 1-Naphthylamine Addition Compounds. I. Preparation from


44. William F. Kieffer, "Editorially Speaking," Journal of Chemical Education, 41 (1964): 293. Classics in the Theory of Chemical Combination is reviewed with Glenn Seaborg's Man-Made Transuranium Elements, which was written for CHEM Study. The editorial describes Benfey's book as "more than a collection of classic masterpieces. Some will consider it a masterpiece in itself."


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