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at
New Haven, Connecticut
on
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JEROME A. BERSON

1924 Born in Sanford, Florida, on 10 May

Education
1944 B.S., chemistry, City College of New York
1947 A.M., chemistry, Columbia University
1949 Ph.D., chemistry, Columbia University

Professional Experience
1944 Hoffmann-La Roche
1944-1946 U.S. Army

University of Southern California
1950-1953 Assistant Professor
1953-1958 Associate Professor
1958-1963 Professor
1963-1969 University of Wisconsin, Professor

Yale University
1969-1979 Professor
1979-1992 Irénée du Pont Professor
1992-1994 Sterling Professor
1994-present Sterling Professor Emeritus of Chemistry and Senior Research Scientist

Honors
1949 National Research Council Postdoctoral Fellowship, Harvard University (R.B. Woodward)
1963 California Section Award, American Chemical Society
1970 National Academy of Sciences
1971 American Academy of Arts and Sciences
1978 James Flack Norris Award in Physical Organic Chemistry, American Chemical Society
1980 U.S. Senior Scientist Award, Alexander von Humboldt Foundation
1985  William H. Nichols Medal, New York Section, American Chemical Society
1987  Roger Adams Award, American Chemical Society
1992  Arthur C. Cope Award, American Chemical Society
1998  Oesper Award, Cincinnati Section, American Chemical Society
2000  Literature Award of the German Chemical Industry Fund
ABSTRACT

Jerome A. Berson was born in Florida, the older of two children. His father taught Hebrew, and his mother was a milliner and housewife. As a result of the Depression his father struggled to earn a living, and when Berson was about ten the family moved to the Bronx, New York, and then to Long Island, New York. He graduated from high school at fifteen and then rode a Good Humor tricycle to earn some money before beginning City College of New York, chosen primarily for economic reasons. He finished at City a semester early and began working on penicillin at Hoffmann-LaRoche. From there he was drafted into the U.S. Army, in which he worked as a medic in India until the end of World War II. When he was demobilized he married Bella Zevitovsky, whom he had met when they were undergraduates.

Knowing he could not progress with only a bachelor's degree, Berson, with the help of the GI Bill, enrolled at Columbia University, where his Ph.D. mentor was William von Eggers Doering. Berson wanted to specialize in the chemistry of natural products, but during these early years Doering began to concentrate on physical organic chemistry. He urged Berson to consider academia as a career and was instrumental in arranging for a postdoctoral fellowship for him with R.B. Woodward at Harvard, where one could soak up the atmosphere of natural products chemistry. Berson credits Woodward and Doering with being two of his prime influences. Learning that jobs were found through the old-boy network, Berson wrote letters to many other universities, receiving only rejections until the University of Southern California (USC) offered him a position. Limited resources and manpower at USC caused him to shift his focus to physical organic chemistry. He attended lively, intense seminars at the University of California, Los Angeles, finding Saul Winstein an enormous influence and eventually “almost a friend.”

After thirteen years at USC Berson, by now a fully-fledged physical organic chemist, was recruited to the University of Wisconsin, where he stayed for “six of the happiest years of [his] life.” At Wisconsin he had funding, facilities, students, and colleagues he could only dream of at USC. His students and he worked hard on exciting, evolving problems; Berson calls it a “seminal time” for him. Thermal and carbocationic rearrangements, and the role of orbital symmetry in chemical reactions, were the focus of his laboratory during this period. While at Wisconsin, Berson had taken note of Erich Hückel’s work, which with Hund's Rule provided continuing themes in his thinking and research.

Yale University then recruited Berson. The personal reasons he chose to move to Yale included having family nearby and being close to New York City’s cultural attractions. Professionally, he noted that Wisconsin’s chemistry department, because of its sheer size, was unwieldy to administrate easily as a unit and hence had been divided into sub-units (organic, inorganic, physical, theoretical, et cetera). This fragmentation did not favor cross-disciplinary interactions. He believed that he had much yet to learn, and he found many teachers and colleagues at Yale and elsewhere. The Yale period included many new studies, especially on non-Kekulé molecules.

Throughout the interview Berson discusses his own research; the many important chemists he has worked in collaboration with and learned from, some at Yale and others elsewhere; some of his scientific controversies and their resolutions; the enormous changes permitted by technological advances; funding; the vagaries of research and importance of time and setting for progress. Berson explains his current work in the history and philosophy of
he concludes his interview with thoughts on the present and future of organic chemistry and physical organic chemistry.

INTERVIEWER

Leon Gortler is Professor of Chemistry Emeritus at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York. He holds AB and MS degrees from the University of Chicago and a Ph.D. from Harvard University where he worked with Paul D. Bartlett. He has long been interested in the history of chemistry, in particular the development of physical organic chemistry, and has conducted over fifty oral and videotaped interviews with major American chemists.
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