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GEORGE A. OLAH

Transcript of an Interview
Conducted by

James G. Traynham and Arnold Thackray

at

Loker Hydrocarbon Research Institute
Los Angeles, California

on

3 February 2000

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

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Chemical Heritage Foundation
Oral History Program
315 Chestnut Street
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19106



GEORGE A. OLAH

1927 Born in Budapest, Hungary, on 22 May

Education

1945 B.S., organic chemistry, Technical University, Budapest
1949 Ph.D., organic chemistry, Technical University, Budapest

Professional Experience

1949-1954 Technical University, Budapest, Hungary
Assistant Professor to Associate Professor of Organic Chemistry

1954-1956 Hungarian Academy of Sciences
Head of Department of Organic Chemistry and
Associate Scientific Director of Central Research Institute

1957-1964 The Dow Chemical Company
Senior Research Scientist

1965-1967 Case Western Reserve University
Professor and Chairman, Department of Chemistry
1967-1969 Chairman of Combined Departments of Chemistry (Case Institute and
Western Reserve University)
1967-1977 C. F. Mabery Distinguished Professor of Research in Chemistry

1977-1977 University of Southern California
Professor of Chemistry and Scientific Director, Hydrocarbon Research
Institute

1980-present Distinguished Professor of Chemistry
1983-present Donald P. and Katherine B. Loker Distinguished Professor of Organic
Chemistry
1991-present Director, Loker Hydrocarbon Research Institute

Honors

1964 Award in Petroleum Chemistry, American Chemical Society
1967 Leo H. Baekeland Award
1970 Morley Medal

1972 Fellow, J. S. Guggenheim Foundation
1976 Member, U.S. National Academy of Sciences
1979 Award for Creative Work in Synthetic Organic Chemistry, American
Chemical Society
1979 Alexander von Humbolt-Stiftung Award for Senior U.S. Scientist
1987 Michelson-Morley Award, Case Western Reserve University
1988 Fellow, J. S. Guggenheim Foundation
1989 California Scientist of the Year Award
1989 Roger Adams Award in Organic Chemistry, American Chemical Society
1990 Honorary Member, Hungarian Academy of Sciences
1992 Richard C. Tolman Award, American Chemical Society, Southern California
Section
1993 Chemical Pioneers Award, American Institute of Chemists, Inc.
1993 William Lloyd Evans Award, Ohio State University
1994 Nobel Prize in Chemistry
1995 George Washington Award, American Hungarian Foundation
1996 Cotton Medal, American Chemical Society, Texas A&M University
1996 Kapista Medal, Russian Academy of Natural Sciences
1996 Inventor of the Year Award, New York Intellectual Property Lawyers Assoc.
1996 Award in Petroleum Chemistry renamed "George A. Olah Award in
Petroleum Chemistry," American Chemical Society
1996 Golden Plate Award, American Academy of Achievement
1997 State Prize of the Republic of Hungary for Contributions to the "Fame of
Hungary"
1999 Golden Medal of Charles University, Prague, Czechoslovakia
1999 Hanus Medal, Czechoslovak Chemical Society
2000 Cope Award, American Chemical Society

ABSTRACT

George A. Olah begins the interview with a description of his family and childhood years in Budapest, Hungary. Olah first developed an interest in chemistry after taking a chemistry course at Technical University of Budapest. While a laboratory assistant at the Zemplen Institute, Olah received his first patent on digoxin under the mentorship of Geza Zemplen, a carbohydrate chemist and former student of Hermann Emil Fischer. With Zemplen's approval, Olah began his work on organofluorine compounds. In 1949, Olah received his Ph.D. in organic chemistry from Technical University. That same year, Olah married Judith Lengyel. Olah joined the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1954 as the head of the department of organic chemistry and associate scientific director of the Central Research Institute. During a momentary collapse of the Iron Wall in 1956, Olah, his wife, and young son fled Hungary to take refuge with family members in London, England. Finally settling in Sarnia, Ontario, Canada in 1957, Olah became a senior research scientist at the Sarnia laboratory of Dow Chemical Company. Impressed by the work of Christopher Kelk Ingold, Olah turned his research towards Friedel-Crafts reactions, alkylations, and nitrations. After moving to a Dow facility in Massachusetts, Olah was offered the position of professor and chemistry department chair at Western Reserve University. Shortly after starting at Western Reserve, Olah aided in the coalescence of Western Reserve University and Case Institute of Technology, which now form Case Western Reserve University. Following twelve years of service at Case Western, Olah decided that he wanted to apply his chemistry to the broader area of hydrocarbons, so he accepted an offer from the University of Southern California in Los Angeles as a professor of chemistry and scientific director of the Hydrocarbon Research Institute, which was later named Loker Hydrocarbon Research Institute. Olah is currently the director of this institute. Olah concludes the interview with a discussion of the future of environmental chemistry, reflections on winning the 1994 Nobel Prize in chemistry, and thoughts on his family.

INTERVIEWERS

James G. Traynham is a professor of chemistry at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge. He holds a Ph.D. in organic chemistry from Northwestern University. He joined Louisiana State University in 1963 and served as chemistry department chairperson from 1968 to 1973. He was chairman of the American Chemical Society's Division of the History of Chemistry in 1988 and is currently councilor of the Baton Rouge section of the American Chemical Society. He was a member of the American Chemical Society's Joint-Board Council on Chemistry and Public Affairs, as well as a member of the Society's Committees on Science, Chemical Education, and Organic Chemistry Nomenclature. He has written over ninety publications, including a book on organic nomenclature and a book on the history of organic chemistry.

Arnold Thackray is president of the Chemical Heritage Foundation. He majored in the physical sciences before turning to the history of science, receiving a Ph.D. from Cambridge University in 1966. He has held appointments at Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, the Institute for Advanced Study, the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In 1983 he received the Dexter Award from the American Chemical Society for outstanding contributions to the history of chemistry. He served on the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania for more than a quarter of a century. There, he was the founding chairman of the Department of History and Sociology of Science, where he is the Joseph Priestley Professor Emeritus.

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