

CENTER FOR HISTORY OF CHEMISTRY

VLADIMIR PRELOG

Transcript of an Interview
Conducted by

Tonja Koepfel

in

Zürich, Switzerland

on

17 January 1984

Vladimir
Prelog JH
3/18/96

TER FOR HISTORY OF CHEMISTRY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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ABSTRACT: In this interview Vladimir Prelog discusses his long and distinguished career as an organic chemist. He begins by recalling his early education in Yugoslavia, doctoral studies in Prague, and first job as a chemist. He returned to Yugoslavia in 1935 to teach at the Technical Faculty of the University of Zagreb. The interview continues with Prelog describing how he finessed the problems of war and foreign occupation by emigrating to Switzerland, where he began a thirty-five year long affiliation with the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH). The central portion of the interview contains Prelog's reflections on his research at the ETH. This includes work with the chemistry of natural products and with stereochemistry, and his creation (with Cahn and Ingold) of the CIP system for defining absolute configuration. The interview concludes with Prelog speaking about the growing complexity and expense of chemical research, his relationships with American chemists, his current research, and the future of chemistry and chemical education.

INTERVIEWER: Dr. Tonja A. Koepfel received a master's degree in chemistry from the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in 1944. Since then she has written about, researched, and taught college chemistry. Dr. Koepfel is also an historian of chemistry. In 1973 she earned a Ph.D. degree in the history and sociology of science from the University of Pennsylvania. She is especially interested in the development of organic chemistry in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

NOTE: The following table correlates the tapes of the Prelog interview with the pages of this transcript.

Tape 1, side 1.....	pp. 1-8
side 2.....	pp. 8-16
Tape 2, side 1.....	pp. 16-25
side 2.....	pp. 25-33
Tape 3, side 1.....	pp. 33-34

VLADIMIR PRELOG

1906 Born in Sarajevo, Yugoslavia, 23 July

Education

1929 D.Sc., Chemistry, Prague Institute of Technology

Professional Experience

1929-1935 Head, Laboratory of G.J. Dríza (Prague)
1935-1941 Lecturer and Associate Professor, Technical Faculty of Zagreb University
Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Zürich
1942-1950 Lecturer and Associate Professor
1950-1976 Professor
1957-1965 Head, Laboratory of Organic Chemistry

Honors

1946 Werner Medal and Prize, Swiss Chemical Society
1962 Stas Medal, Belgian Chemical Society
1962 Medal of Honor, Rice University
1965 Marcel Benoist Prize, Switzerland
1966 Hanus Medal, Czechoslovakian Chemical Society
1967 A.W. von Hofmann Memorial Medal, German Chemical Society
1968 Davy Medal, Royal Society of London
1969 Roger Adams Award, American Chemical Society
1974 Paul Karrer Award, University of Zürich
1975 Nobel Prize for Chemistry
1976 Paracelsus Medal
1977 Order of the Yugoslavian Star
1977 Order of the Rising Sun, Japan
1978 Emil Votocek Medal, Chemical-Technical University, Prague

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1 Childhood
Witnesses political events in Yugoslavia.
Education in Zagreb. Early interest in
chemistry. Publishes chemistry paper at
age of fifteen. Father's occupation.
Influence of history.
- 4 Studies in Prague at the Institute of Technology
Early chemical engineering. Personal
philosophy of chemistry. Finishes studies
in short time. Dissertation. Natural
products chemistry. Stereochemistry.
- 7 Industrial Research and Academic Career
Preparation of compounds not commercially
available. Quinine research. University of
Zagreb. Swiss Federal Institute of Technology.
Swiss Chemical Society. Helvetica
Chimica Acta.
- 12 Natural Products Research
European chemists who emigrated to the United
States. Organ extract research. Alkaloid
research. Adamantane research. Robert
Woodward. Creation of the Woodward Institute
in Basel.
- 18 Research into Stereochemistry
Initial involvement. Collaboration with Cahn
and Ingold. The CIP system. Conformations.
Key people in stereochemistry.
- 23 Swiss Federal Institute of Technology
Awarded Nobel Prize. Courses taught in organic
chemistry. Administrative duties. Colleagues.
Funding. Research. Collaboration among indus-
try, research chemists, and microbiologists.
- 29 Reflections about the Field of Chemistry
Comparison of early and present periods.
Relationships with American chemists. Current
interests. Future of chemistry and chemical
engineering. Preservation of letters and
manuscripts.

INDEX

adamantane	15
Adams, Roger	30
aglycone	6
alkaloid research	8, 9, 13, 14, 18, 19
American Chemical Society (ACS)	12, 26, 31
Amherst College	30
amines	32
amino acids	32
ammonium sulfite	7
animal husbandry	13
antibiotic	28
Arigoni, Duilio	26
arsenicals	8
asymmetric atoms	18
Atlantic City, New Jersey	31
Bamberger, Eugen	22
Basel, Switzerland	11, 17
Basel, University of	26
"Beilstein test"	20
Beilstein's <u>Handbuch der Organischen Chemie</u>	19, 20
benzopyren	8
<u>Berichte der Deutschen Chemischen Gesellschaft</u>	11
birth control pill	12
boars	13
Cahn, Robert Sydney	18, 19
California, University of, Berkeley	30
California, University of, Los Angeles	30
carcinogenics	8
<u>Chemical Abstracts</u>	20
chemical engineering	4
chemical technology	4
<u>Chemiker Zeitung</u>	3
Cherbuliez, Emile	11
Chicago, University of	30
chloroacetophenone	7
chromatography	31
CIBA, Ltd.	17, 27
CIBA-Geigy Co.	27
cinchona alkaloids	8, 14, 18
CIP (Cahn, Ingold, Prelog) system	19-20, 33
Columbia University	30
"computer test"	20
conformations	21
Cornell University	26, 30

Croatia	2, 9
Czechoslovakia	7
Debye-Scherrer X-ray photograph	15
diastereomer	23
diazomethane solutions	8
dihydroquinine	9
docent	9
doctoral degree	6
"Dorfaltester"	26
Dríza, Gothard	7
Dunitz, Jack D.	26
Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule (ETH)	4, 10, 17, 22, 23, 24, 33
Einstein, Albert	32
enantiomers	22, 31
Engel, Bruno	25
Ernst, Ivan	17
Eschenmoser, Albert	17, 26
European educational system	3-4
<u>Experientia</u>	19
Ferdinand, Archduke Franz	1,2
Fichter, Fritz	11
Fischer, Emil	18
fume hoods	8
Gäuman, Ernst	28
Geigy, Ltd.	27
Geneva, Switzerland	11
German army	9
German Chemical Society	9, 12
Germany	4, 9, 10
glycosides	6
Gosteli, Jacques	17
Hantzsch, Arthur	22
Harvard University	16, 26, 30
Heilbronner, Edgar	26
helices	21
Helmchen, Günter	20
<u>Helvetica Chimica Acta</u>	11
Heussler, Karl	17
Hitler, Adolf	11
Hoffman-LaRoche Co.	12
hormones	13
Illinois, University of	30
Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI)	20
Ingold, Christopher K., Sir	18, 19

Institute of Technology (Prague)	4, 9
instrumentation	28
<u>Journal of the American Chemical Society</u>	10
Jung, Carl Gustav	33
Karrer, Paul	11, 23, 32
Kuhn, Richard	9, 22
lachrimator	7
Lewis, Gilbert N.	30
Leuchs, Hermann	14
Librium	12
Liebig's <u>Annalen der Chemie</u> (<u>Annalen</u>)	11
liquid separation	31
London, England	19
Lukes, Rudolf	7, 15
M and P system	21
Madison, Wisconsin	30
malaria research	8, 18
Manchester, England	18, 19
Mann, Thomas	33
Marburg, University of	4
Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)	30
Meyer, Victor	22
microbiology	28
musk oil	13, 14
National Science Foundation	28
natural products chemistry	6, 12, 30
nitroso urea	8
Nobel Prize	16, 18, 22, 23, 24
Nutley, New Jersey	12
Octagon House	19
organ extracts	12
Organic Chemistry Laboratory, ETH	10, 22
Osijek, Yugoslavia	2
Pauling, Linus	30
permanent waves	7
physical organic chemistry	22
polycyclic compounds	14
powder diagrams	15
Prague, Czechoslovakia	4, 9
privatdocent	10
Prelog, Milan	2, 3
Prelog, Vladimir, brother of	4
Prelog, Vladimir, grandfather of	4
Prelog, Vladimir, son of	4

proteins	32
Purdue University	30
qualitative analysis	5
quantitative analysis	5
quinine research	8, 9, 18
R and S system	20
reaction mechanisms	6
Realgymnasium	2,3
Reichstein, Tadeus	11
research funding	27-29
rhamnoconvolvulinolic acid	6
Richter, Friedrich	19
rifamycin	28
rings, chemical	15
Robinson, Sir Robert	14
Roger Adams Award (ACS)	26
Rosenkranz, George	12
rotating chairmanship	26, 27
Royal Society of Chemistry	12, 19
Ruzicka, Leopold	9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 16
	22, 24, 25, 26, 27, 30, 31, 33
Sarajevo, Yugoslavia	1, 2
Scherrer, Paul	29
selenium	8
sequence rule	19
sex attractants	13
Simon, Wilhelm	31
Sputnik	29
Staedeler, Georg	22
Staudinger, Hermann	22
stereochemistry	6, 7, 15, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22
stereoformula	18
stereogenic unit	21
stereoisomer	18, 19, 20, 21
stereospecific pathways	18
Sternbach, Leo	12
steroids	12, 13
Stockholm, Sweden	23
strychnine research	14
sugar chemistry	6
Swiss-American Foundation	16
Swiss Chemical Society	11, 12
Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH)	4, 10, 11, 23, 24, 33
Swiss National Science Foundation	28

Switzerland	11, 20, 23, 24, 28
Syntex Corporation	12
technical high school (technische Hochschule)	4
tellurium	8
"Thoughts After 118 Semesters of Chemistry"	4, 7
titration apparatus	3
Tollens, Bernhard	6
toxic chemical research	7, 8
truffles	13
u and l system	20
United States of America	1, 7, 10, 12, 26, 28, 29, 30, 31, 33
Urbana, Illinois	30
Valium	12
Van't Hoff, Jacobus H.	21, 22
"Verwaltungsrat"	27
vitamin B ₁₂ research	17
Votocek, Emil	6
Werner, Alfred	22, 23
Widmer, Sigmund	23
Wieland, Heinrich	14
Willstätter, Richard	22
Wislicenus, Johannes	22
Wisconsin, University of	30
Woodward Institute (Basel)	17
Woodward, Robert B.	14, 15-17
X-ray analysis	18
Yale University	26, 30
Zagreb, University of	3, 9, 16, 23, 24, 27
Zagreb, Yugoslavia	2, 3, 9, 10, 15
Zürich, Switzerland	1, 9, 12, 15, 17