

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;
Chemical Heritage
University of Pennsylvania
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
Teaches physical organic chemistry mechanisms and chemistry for non-majors. Supervises undergraduate research. Receives Research Corporation grant for summer research. Publishes on history of chemistry. Active in Philadelphia Organic Chemists Club and Society for Social Responsibility in Science. Meets and marries Rachel Thomas.
- 45 Harvard University
Lives with parents in Cambridge. Works with Conant's group. Enjoys studying the lives and original works of great chemists. Works on translations. Teaches history and philosophy of science courses. Studies structural theory, and with Westheimer the bipyridyl problem.
- 51 Earlham College
Continues bipyridyl 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.

- 77 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.
- 83 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.
- 88 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.
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NOTES

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