

Eduard Farber (1892–1969)



Eduard Faber was born on April 17, 1892 at Brody, Galicia (then in Austria-Hungary, now a part of the Ukraine). He grew up in Leipzig where his father, a businessman, expected his son to follow his vocation. Eduard, however, was an excellent student and preferred the intellectual life; eventually his father consented to his entering the University of Leipzig after graduating from the Oberrealschule. Specializing in chemistry (organic), physics, and mineralogy, he took his Ph.D. in 1916 and became assistant to Carl Neuberg at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute für Experimentelle Therapie in Berlin. An eye defect saved Farber from military service but did not permit him to continue with Neuberg while the war was in a critical period. At Neuberg's suggestion he spent 1917–1918 in the laboratory of Spiritusfabrik in Budapest, converting a fermentation plant into a plant for production of glycerin to be used in munitions production. When the war ended he returned briefly to Neuberg's laboratory before he became chief chemist and director of chemical research at Deutsche Bergin A.G. and

Holzhydrolyse A.G. at Mannheim-Rheiuau and Heidelberg.

As soon as the Nazis came to power he anticipated the forthcoming tragedy of Germany and began making plans to emigrate to the U.S. but it was 1938 before he and his family were permitted to leave. Arriving in the U.S. with letters of recommendation but no funds, he searched for employment. He was called upon to open a laboratory for the Polyxor Chemical Company in New Haven, Connecticut. Here he developed new uses for waste paper while also acting as a consultant. In 1943 he moved to Washington, D.C., to become director of chemical research for the Timber Engineering Company. When he retired in 1957, he had applied successfully for more than 85 patents and was the author of about 50 papers based on his research. During his retirement years he continued consulting activities but his major activity was the history of chemistry.

Farber became interested in history of chemistry when he read Ernst Meyer's *Geschichte der Chemie* while still a student. Following the war, while at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institut, he used his spare time to write a history which revealed the development of chemistry within an educational, economic, and social context, an approach he had found missing in Meyer and other historians of chemistry. Upon showing the manuscript to Neuberg, Farber was reprimanded for spending his time on history. Impressed with Farber's initiative, however, Neuberg helped him find a publisher. The book was published in 1921. Although Farber conscientiously pursued his career as a chemist thereafter, he seriously pursued history as an avocation.

With his brother, an edited translation of Boyle's *Skeptical Chymist* [*Der Skeptische Chemiker von Robert Boyle*] was published in 1928. At about the same time he contributed five biographies to Bugge's *Das Buch der Grossen Chemiker*. After reaching America he gave more time to history, publishing numerous papers and five more books [including: *The Evolution of Chemistry* (1952, 2nd ed. 1969); *Nobel Prize Winners in Chemistry* (1953, 1962); and *Milestones of Modern Chemistry* (1966).] In Washington, he became active in ACS affairs, particularly in HIST. He served as chairman of the division in 1955–56 and was closely involved in divisional affairs until the time of his death. He was also active in the Washington Chapter of the American Institute of Chemists and received their Honor Award in 1954.

During his adult lifetime he always enjoyed the intellectual stimulation of living near a university. In 1962 he was made adjunct professor at the American University in Washington and also served as a consultant to the Smithsonian Institution. For several years he taught a history of chemistry course at American University and secured grants to aid his research.

Farber, an industrial chemist with a historical avocation, received the Dexter Award in 1964 for a long series of contributions to the history of chemistry, in particular his two histories of chemistry, for editing *Great Chemists* (1961), and for other books.

Eduard Farber died of cancer on July 15, 1969. He was a gentle person who was a stimulating companion. He enjoyed sharing his fund of knowledge and his wealth of experiences with others.

Sources

The preceding text is taken from Aaron J. Ihde, *A Quarter Century of Dexter Awards*, 1981, unpublished manuscript. Copy in the University of Pennsylvania Library, QD21 .Q8 1981a; an abridged version can be found in *Bulletin for the History of Chemistry* 2 (1988): 13–14.

Robert Multhauf, "Eloge: Eduard Farber," *Isis* 62 (1971): 220–224.

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