

Obituary

Hermann Blaschko (1900-1993)

Professor Hermann (Hugh) Blaschko died in Oxford on 18 April 1993. He was born at the beginning of the century, in 1900. In the same year the term 'chromaffin' was introduced to describe a histochemical reaction due to the presence of adrenaline. Many years later this term and this compound were very much at the centre of Blaschko's important scientific discoveries.

Hermann Blaschko studied medicine in Berlin and Freiburg where he met his fellow student and later Nobel laureate Hans Krebs, and started a lifelong friendship with him. Even as a student Blaschko attended scientific meetings, and in 1924 he went to the 'Deutsche Naturforscher and Ärzte Tag' (a meeting of German scientists and physicians) in Innsbruck, Austria. Due to his phenomenal memory, he remembered all the details of such events much later in life. For example, he liked to recount how in 1924 he walked down from the village of Igls through the woods to the city of Innsbruck to listen to the future Nobel laureate Otto Loewi, who talked about the effect of the vagus and 'accelerans substance' on the frog heart. This 'accelerans substance' was soon identified as adrenaline, but it was some time before Blaschko began to concentrate his study on it.

Blaschko started scientific research in Otto Meyerhof's laboratory in Berlin where work at that time concentrated on the energetics of the muscle. From there he made his first visit to England to work for a year (1929-1930) with Archibald V. Hill (who shared a Nobel prize with Meyerhof). To use Blaschko's own words, in Hill's laboratory 'the spirit of freedom and friendship was exceptional'. This stay in England established contacts that soon became essential because of the political developments in Germany.

Hermann Blaschko came from a distinguished German family of medical doctors. His father, Alfred Blaschko, was a famous dermatologist who was President of the



German Dermatological Society and who was also involved in the social aspects of medicine (in recognition of his achievements a street in Berlin was named after him). However, for Hermann Blaschko, the son of this Jewish family, there was at that time no place in a country where the Nazis had just started to implement their criminal policies. Like so many other promising or leading German (and Austrian) scientists, he had to find refuge abroad. So in May 1933 he was glad to take up an invitation from Hill to return to England.

In his first year there Blaschko worked with the Academic Assistance Council, an organization formed to help the many refugee scholars. In 1934 he joined Joseph Barcroft in Cambridge, who asked him one day, 'How is adrenaline destroyed?' The search for an answer to this straightforward question led to the important discovery of the amine oxidases in 1937. Two years later Blaschko proposed for the first time the correct pathway for the synthesis of adrenaline from tyrosine. This work provided a foundation for many subsequent scientific discoveries and for the introduction of drugs for treating psychosis and Parkinson's disease. In 1944

Blaschko moved to the Pharmacology Department in Oxford where he eventually became *ad hominem* reader of Biochemical Pharmacology. In Oxford he met and married Mary Black, who was his ideal partner for nearly 50 years. At 24 Park Town, close to the centre of Oxford, Hugh and Mary Blaschko were friendly hosts to numerous scientists - from students to Nobel laureates. All those who once worked in Blaschko's laboratory or who were visitors to Hugh and Mary's house knew that they could always come back to these places as to second homes. Blaschko was one of the founding members of Linacre College, which was established with the special role of integrating foreign postgraduate students into Oxford's academic life.

In 1953 Blaschko and Arnold Welch discovered that adrenaline is stored in cells in a specialized subcellular particle, the chromaffin granule. All our knowledge about the storage of hormones and neurotransmitters in large dense-cored and small synaptic vesicles is based on this decisive discovery. In 1962, Blaschko was elected Fellow of the Royal Society and he received honorary degrees from the Universities of Berlin, Berne, and Freiburg im Breisgau. But public praise and honour were not the centre of Blaschko's life nor of the members of his laboratory. His outstanding characteristics were his enjoyment in scientific work, his delight in an intellectual challenge and his desire to work in a friendly atmosphere and not to concentrate on priority or competitiveness. He was a scientific scholar in the true sense and a man to be admired for his kindness and contentedness. Although his pupils and friends will now miss him, what they have learned from him will surely not be lost.

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