

BOOK REVIEW

Ralph E. Oesper: The Human Side of Scientists

University of Cincinnati Publications, 1975, 216 p.

Ralph E. Oesper is one of the great personalities of American scientific life. After 35 years at the Department for Chemistry of the University of Cincinnati, he retired in 1951. But he did not stop working and since then, — as “professor emeritus” — he has been so dynamically active that it were to the credit of a young scientist. Even these days, in his eighties, he is actively engaged in writing, translation, reviewing; like a long-life radioactive isotope emitting his energy with constant intensity barely depending on time. His field of interest turned gradually to sciences in general, and in particular, to the history of chemistry. Within the history of science he is interested less in science itself than in scientists. Oesper has always been characterized by deep humanity and this is reflected also in his attractive new book. According to the author's words: “Science courses have now become so dehumanized that it is well to remind our listeners and readers occasionally that even the leaders in science are basically human though endowed with special talents.”

This is why he collected stories on scientists. Some are somehow more than simple anecdotes. Often, an appropriate remark, or a sentence of a scientist uttered in special circumstances better characterizes his problems and thoughts than an extended study of ten pages.

For instance when in a laboratory Max Planck, father of quantum theory, first glimpsed an apparatus that registered individual light quanta by audible clicks, he stood silently for a while and just listened. Then he smiled and murmured, obviously speaking to himself: “So they do exist.” The shock of the scientist surprised that his logical conclusion is really true is included in this sentence.

The physical chemistry as a comprehensive science has been created from several findings by the many-sided, romantic genius: Wilhelm Ostwald. He was once asked what physical chemistry really was and in what respects it differed from both chemistry and physics. Ostwald replied: “The chemists work with inaccurate and poor measuring devices but they employ very good materials. The physicists on the other hand use excellent methods and accurate instruments but they apply these to very inferior materials. The physical chemists combine both of these characteristics in that they apply imprecise methods to impure materials.” The really great alone can allow himself to mock at his own achievement, as did Ostwald.

Pauli's opinion is worth keeping in mind by great many researchers. He was very cautious in regard to what he said and published, he simply could not agree with one of his colleagues of whom he remarked: “The fact that X Y thinks slowly is not serious, but that he publishes faster than he thinks is inexcusable.”

Our Nobel-prize winner compatriote Hevesy is also included in the book, whom we read of: “Hevesy was rather forgetful and would often forget to come home for special occasions, even when he personally had invited guests. He was extremely proud of his four children but often embarrassed them by his lapses of memory. One day he rushed from his office, wearing only one of his galoshes, knowing that his family would audibly express themselves at another unseemly exhibition by their professor-father. Mounting his bicycle he shouted to one of his assistants: Young man, you are indeed lucky. You have your rabbits, but I have to go home to my family.”

The above are hoped to be illustrative excerpts from the book, containing stories about 138 scientists, most of them chemists. In reading the book one often feels that the person in question was an intimate acquaintance of the author who draws on his own memories. May induce you the book to notice the human side of our contemporaries, representatives of present-day science.

F. SZABADVÁRY