

Otto Rahn

April 9, 1881 — September 26, 1957

Dr. Otto Rahn served as Professor of Bacteriology at Cornell University from 1927 until 1949. In those 22 years, Dr. Rahn endeared himself to a large group of undergraduate and graduate students.

He was born in Tiegenhof in the Province of West Prussia between the cities of Danzig and Elbing in 1881. He was third of eleven children, son of Isbrand Rahn, a Mennonite storekeeper and Marie Rahn,, whose maiden name was Claassen. His early interests led him first toward the ministry but later toward mathematics and chemistry. In 1899 he matriculated at the University of Göttingen to major in organic chemistry and he received the degree of Ph.D. cum laude on December 24, 1902.

Young Dr. Rahn accepted a position as assistant in Dairy Science at Göttingen and served there from 1902 to 1906. In addition to his duties as an assistant, Rahn found time to do research on the biochemistry of bacterial growth. When it became evident that his chances of advancing to the rank of instructor were rather poor, he left Göttingen and became an assistant at the Agricultural Experiment Station at Halle where he remained for one year. During these years as an assistant, Dr. Rahn had corresponded frequently with bacteriologists in the United States. Through this correspondence and the reputation gained from publications in scientific journals, Rahn was offered an assistant professorship in bacteriology at Michigan State College which he readily accepted. From 1907 to 1912, Dr. Rahn divided his time between teaching and research. He and his assistant, Miss Belle Farrand, worked together on many bacteriological problems, both fundamental and applied in nature. This partnership became a permanent one on September 4, 1911, when Dr. Rahn and Miss Farrand were married in Lansing, Michigan. In 1912, Dr. Rahn left Michigan to accept a position at the University of Illinois, where during the next two years he built up a strong Department of Bacteriology. In 1914, Dr. Rahn took his family to Germany to meet his relatives from whom he had been separated for seven years.

Unfortunately, war broke out and Dr. Rahn was still a German citizen. He lacked about three weeks' time to complete the requirements for American citizenship. The Rahn family was trapped in Germany for the next 12 years. Professor Rahn was cut off from professional work and found it necessary to operate the family hotel until he was drafted into the German Army. Then he served for two years as a clerk at an airplane station in Latvia where he used his spare time to organize a classification of bacteria. This work was not published until much later, but it helped to establish his reputation as a bacteriologist in Germany. He was discharged from the army in

1918 and returned to his family in Danzig with no opportunity for work in his chosen profession. He could not return to America and he had no contacts with European institutions. In 1919 he received an assistantship in the Agricultural College in Berlin where he wrote a monograph on the effect of straw upon crop production. In 1920, he was appointed Director of the Physical Chemistry Department (which later became the Department of Physics) at the Prussian Experimental and Research Institute for Dairying in Kiel, with the title of Professor. In 1925, he became Verwaltungsdirektor of the Institute. At this time he satisfied the requirements as "privat dozent" of the University of Kiel which entitled him to teach in the University proper. Until his death, he retained the right to lecture in this German University. At Kiel, he studied the clumping of fat globules in milk and developed a theory of churning which explained many of the phenomena in butter which had not been understood before that time.

His work on the physical properties of dairy products so interested American investigators that in 1926 he received an invitation from a group of American universities to lecture in this country. He spent nearly a year lecturing in the United States. Cornell University was one of the inviting institutions and he so impressed the staff in Dairy Industry that in 1927, after his return to Germany, he was invited to become Professor of Bacteriology at Cornell University. At Cornell, he became an outstanding teacher and his laboratory in bacterial physiology was a highlight in the Cornell teaching program. He studied biological radiation, fermentations, and the growth and aging of cells.

Dr. Rahn preferred to work at his desk with statistics, graphs, charts and curves. He was not adept at laboratory work but he was a prolific source of ideas and set his graduate students and assistants a fast pace in providing questions which could be answered by experiment. He could read more from experimental data than could most workers, often much more than the authors of the paper he read. He preferred the theoretical problem to the practical. Often when he had shown that something could be done, all his interest was lost. His students found his enthusiasm and creativeness to be contagious and he was greatly respected as a teacher and leader in research. His European charm, his quick wit and lively sense of humor will always be remembered by those who knew him.

In 1949, Professor Rahn retired from Cornell University at the age of 68 and accepted a position at Idaho State College as Professor of Bacteriology. In 1951 he reached the compulsory retirement age at Idaho but he received a grant from the United States Public Health Service to continue his study on the aging of cells and he continued this work in Pocatello until 1954. During this period, he took six months leave to lecture at the University of Nebraska. After leaving Idaho State College, Professor Rahn and Mrs. Rahn made their home near a daughter, Margarete, in Delaware. There he died on September 26, 1957. The ideas and the research of Dr. Otto Rahn are well expressed

in his ten books and more than 150 research papers. His contribution to Dairy Physics and to Bacteriology assure him of a permanent place in the history of Science.

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