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Chemical Landmark 2015 – Designation of the Former Institute of Chemistry of the University of Fribourg

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On the 13th of October, the Swiss Academy of Sciences SCNAT designated the former institute of chemistry of the University of Fribourg as «Chemical Landmark». The award ceremony took place in the course of the «Fribourg Chaim Weizmann Lecture». The combined festivities attracted an audience of more than 200 participants.



The chemical institute was established in the former wagon factory (center).^[2]

Prof. Dr. **Katharina Fromm** (SCNAT, Uni FR) moderated the program and welcomed the guests. Dr. **Jürg Pfister**, secretary general of SCNAT, briefly introduced SCNAT and the «Chemical Landmark» program, Prof. Dr. **Andreas Zumbühl** presented the Fribourg Chemical Society, and **Beat Vonlanthen** (Conseil d'État FR) proudly conveyed the congratulations of the cantonal government of Fribourg.

In his laudation, Prof. em. Dr. **Alexander von Zelewsky** provided an insight into the history of the institutes. The university was founded upon the initiative of the conseil d'état Georges Python in 1886. Shortly after, in 1896 the faculty of science was opened. Chemistry was installed in a former wagon factory, which had been used as an arsenal for the artillery. Already the first institute of chemistry was from the beginning committed to bilingualism. The first appointed chemistry professor was A. Bistrzycki from Germany. The first associate professor René Thomas-Mamert was called from France. The academic career ladder was different at that time: Thomas-Mamert started in Fribourg in 1896, finished his doctorate in 1897 and was subsequently promoted to full professor. Bistrzycki already had a group of eleven students whom he brought with him to the new and unknown University of Fribourg. Among them was Chaim Weizmann, eponym of the «Fribourg Chaim Weizmann Lec-

ture», who later became the first president of Israel, co-founded the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and founded the research institute that was later called Weizmann-Institute.



Impression of the audience.

In the early 20th century, a descendant from an old Fribourg family, Henri de Diesbach, was appointed professor for chemistry. Working in his group, Edmond von der Weid was the first to publish the synthesis of phthalocyanine.^[1] Amazed about the stability and colourfulness of the molecule, they offered it to the chemical industry in Basel, who was not interested at that time. The technological importance of phthalocyanine was not yet recognised, and the use and mass production started a couple of years later in England. Even today, it plays an important role. In 2000, more than 10'000 tons of phthalocyanines were produced, and 25% of all artificial organic pigments are phthalocyanine derivatives. In honour of this discovery, the «Chemical Landmark» plaque was anodized turquoise with a phthalocyanine dye.



Old sample of Cu-phthalocyanine from the de Diesbach group.



Katharina Fromm, Alexander von Zelewsky, Beat Vonlanthen, Astrid Epiney and Jürg Pfister unveil the «Chemical Landmark» plaque.

Von Zelewsky, who himself had worked in the old chemistry institute, flavoured his laudation with several anecdotes. He told stories about chemists using chemical tricks to enter the building during holidays to do their research and of (photo-)reactions that could be accomplished in the laboratories in Basel but not in the dark laboratories in Fribourg.

The unveiling of the commemorative plaque concluded the «Chemical Landmark» part of the event. The plaque was attached at an entrance of the original building and is now visible to the public.

The second part of the festivities was the Chaim Weizmann Lecture by Nobel laureate Prof. **Alan Heeger**, from the University of California, Santa Barbara.



Alan Heeger speaking about creativity, discovery and risk in research.

At the concluding apéro the audience had the opportunity to talk to the Nobel laureate Alan Heeger, the ambassador of Israel Y. Caspi, the conseil d'état B. Vonlanthen and of course the researchers.

Additional information on the «Chemical Landmarks» may be found at chemicallandmarks.ch.

Additional information about the «Platform Chemistry» and its activities may be found at chemistry.scnat.ch.

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[1] H. de Diesbach, E. von der Weid, *Helv. Chim. Acta*, **1927**, *10*, 886; DOI:10.1002/hlca.192701001110

[2] Historical photograph: Service des biens culturels Fribourg, Fonds Héribert Reiners. Current photographs: Charles Ellena and Leo Merz.



Impressions from the apéro.