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‘A GENIUS FOR FRIENDSHIP’: FRITZ HABER

As an outstanding physical chemist Fritz Haber (1868-1933) undoubtedly deserves his place in Feuchtwanger’s list of German Jews who made an indispensable contribution to modern civilization. This did not save him, however, from the cruel humiliation of enforced emigration after Hitler’s accession to power in January 1933. So disillusioned and embittered was Haber by the painful experience of removal from his post as founding director of the Institut für physikalische Chemie und Elektrochemie (set up in 1911 under the auspices of the new Kaiser Wilhelm-Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Wissenschaften in Berlin) that the erstwhile German patriot resolved to renounce his German citizenship at the earliest opportunity and to seek a refuge elsewhere in Europe. Among the countries to which he considered moving were Holland, France (where his son Hermann lived), Spain, Palestine, Japan, Russia, and Sweden as well as Britain and Italy: ‘Seelisch am liebsten wäre mir die Royal Society, wobei ich denke, dass mir das englische Bürgerrecht verliehen werden würde. Klimatisch lieber wäre mir Italien.’¹ By the late autumn, however, he appears to have given up the idea of moving anywhere but England² and to have found in Cambridge the professional respect and personal warmth which, by temperament, he so much needed.

Valuable new evidence about the circumstances of Haber’s exile has recently become available with the discovery of ten letters which he addressed to Sir William Pope, Professor of Chemistry at Cambridge, in 1933-34. For reasons which are not known for certain these finished up in the possession of Professor J.E. Coates (University of Swansea). They were subsequently passed to his elder son, Professor Geoffrey Coates (University of Wyoming), and were recently drawn to my attention by his younger son,
Dr John Coates. It is assumed by Geoffrey and John Coates that the letters were given to their father by Pope when he was engaged on writing his Fritz Haber Memorial Lecture, delivered on 29 April 1937 before the Chemical Society in London, although there is nothing in the lecture itself to suggest that Coates drew directly on the letters when writing his assessment of Haber’s life and work.

In his lecture Coates provides an excellent overview of Haber’s greatest scientific achievements while also offering an enlightening perspective on Haber the man as observed by someone who, from 1908 to 1911, had worked with him at close quarters during the ‘Glanzzeit’ of his five years as Professor of Physical Chemistry and Electrochemistry in Karlsruhe (1906-11). Coates’s enduring loyalty to his memory demonstrates the kind of esteem, both professional and personal, which Haber was able to inspire in those who knew him best, although it is true that others took a far less flattering view of his complex and driven personality.

Coates’s admiration for Haber the scientist is unstinting. When praising his mentor’s work on the fixation of nitrogen – an achievement which met the world’s urgent need for nitrogen fertilizer and for which he was to receive (in 1920) the Nobel Prize for 1918 –, Coates remarks on the unusual conjunction of pure science and practical application which was such a distinctive feature of Haber’s work: ‘Rarely if ever had a process been brought in an academic laboratory to such an advanced stage of technical development before being handed on to Industry.’ (1653) But it is Coates’s comments on Haber the man and his capacity for friendship which are particularly striking:

To have known him and worked with him at that time is an experience one does not forget. […] Some thirty to forty men of a dozen different nationalities were united in the friendliest relations by their personal affection for Haber as well as in their admiration of him as a man of science. His kindliness and human sympathy endeared him to all. Discussion of progress was always most helpful and encouraging; he would devote himself wholly to the question in hand until a satisfactory position had been reached. A stupid mistake would be brought home in such a way as to give no pain, and it gave him great pleasure to find that independent work had been done. […] His forceful nature was softened by a deep humanity and kindheartedness. With large-hearted generosity he was always ready to help others, and to this end no effort was too great for him. (1655 and 1670)

Coates does not deny that the experience of war and of Germany’s defeat had a profound effect on Haber, a patriot who had unquestioningly dedicated himself to the service of his country and who through his discovery of how to make ammonia had made possible the production of unlimited quantities of explosives and thereby ‘almost single-handedly saved Germany’ in the early months of the war.