

Fritz Haber

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I went to a very good Jewish school in England, Carmel College (the one my father founded), which was known for the strength of its sciences. In those days they were divided into three separate faculties—chemistry, physics, and biology. The senior master and head of sciences was a brilliant chemist and pedagogue, Romney Coles. He had written several textbooks on chemistry and came to Carmel from one of the top public schools of the country. He built up such a strong department that within a few years of its inception its brightest pupils were winning scholarships to Oxford and Cambridge.

Carmel was a boarding school, and extracurricular, after teaching hours activities played a vital part in the whole ethos of the school. There was one society that was regarded as being for the intellectual elite called, so Romney Coles insisted, the Haber Society. As I was absolutely hopeless at math and sciences, I did not qualify. But I remember the name Haber from that society, even though I never bothered to find out who he was. And I remained in ignorance until a month ago when I began to watch a series on the National Geographic Channel on the life of Albert Einstein. In it, Fritz Haber plays a very important role, mainly as the symbol of a whole generation of men born Jewish but regarding themselves primarily as Germans, most of whom converted to Lutheranism to further their careers and better fit into a basically anti-Semitic culture.

Einstein, was from an assimilated family, too. But he never converted to Christianity. Although he was not a religious man, he came to feel more Jewish as a result of his experiences of anti-Semitism in Germany. He did not call himself a Zionist, but he did support the Hebrew University. Although he turned down Chaim Weizmann's offer of the presidency of the Jewish state, he remained a supporter of Jewish causes. In the TV series, he is shown wrestling with his identity in contrast to Fritz Haber as the archetypal proud assimilationist.

Fritz Haber (1868-1934) was born into a well-off, highly assimilated German Jewish family. As a student at Jena, Haber converted from Judaism to Lutheranism to improve his chances of getting a better academic or military position. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1918 for his invention of the Haber-Bosch process, a method used in industry to synthesize ammonia from nitrogen gas and hydrogen gas. This invention is of importance for the large-scale synthesis of fertilizers and explosives.

Haber was a patriotic German. He supported the First World War with enthusiasm, joining 92 other German intellectuals in signing the [*Manifesto of the Ninety-Three*](#) in October 1914 supporting the war. Haber is considered the "father of chemical warfare" for developing the use of chlorine and other deadly gases for trench warfare in World War I (their use in shells had been proscribed by the Hague Convention of 1907). Haber was present when it was first used by the German military at the Second Battle of Ypres in Belgium.

He defended gas warfare against accusations that it was inhumane; he said that death was death, by whatever means it was inflicted.

After WWI ended, Haber's institute developed the cyanide gas formulation Zyklon A, which was used first as an insecticide, and then by the Germans to murder millions of Jews. Many allied scientists did not forgive Haber's involvement with poison gas.

From 1919 to 1923, Haber continued to be involved in Germany's secret development of chemical weapons, helping both Spain and Russia with chemical gases. But by 1933 Haber realized he could no longer support Hitler's Germany.

During a brief stay in England in 1933, Chaim Weizmann offered Haber the directorship at the Sieff Research Institute (now the Weizmann Institute) in Rehovot, in Mandatory Palestine. He accepted and left for the Middle East in January 1934, but unfortunately he died of heart failure on the way. Haber bequeathed his extensive private library to the Weizmann Institute; it was dedicated as the Fritz Haber Library in January 1936.

Why did Romney Coles choose Fritz Haber to be the name of his precious and prestigious society for young Jewish scientists? Coles was, on the face of it, as proudly English as you get, from tip to toe. He looked and sounded the part. Perhaps it was simply that Coles was a chemist and Haber was a chemist. And Coles was an expert in Haber's process. But why honor someone who was responsible for the gassing of so many of his countrymen? Maybe Coles choose him because he reckoned a Jewish school trumped his English loyalty. He thought it appropriate because Haber was, at the end of his life, reconciled to his Jewish identity and about to go to live in what would become the Jewish homeland. On the other hand, Romney Coles, unlike some other non-Jewish teachers, showed absolutely no interest in Jewish affairs. Perhaps he didn't even know that Haber was Jewish.

I have one other serendipitous theory. Lord Sieff was a governor of Carmel College. Haber, as I said above, donated his library to the Sieff Institute in Israel. Perhaps he was paying the benefactor of Carmel a nod of recognition!

I asked someone who was at Carmel in those days if he knew how the society was named after Haber. He said that he thought a Jewish teacher had given Haber's name to the society. In which case I wonder if that teacher did his historical homework! It will have to remain a mystery.