

1996

51. Ephraim Katchaski-Katzir

Otto Vogl

University of Massachusetts - Amherst, vogl@polysci.umass.edu

Joseph Jagur-Grodzinski

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Vogl, Otto and Jagur-Grodzinski, Joseph, "51. Ephraim Katchaski-Katzir" (1996). *Polymer News*. 96.

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Personalities in Polymer Science



Ephraim Katchalski-Katzir

Honoring Professor Ephraim Katchalski-Katzir on his 80th Birthday

Ephraim Katchalski-Katzir occupies an unique and distinguished position in polymer science. He is a leading figure in the scientific and political life in the State of Israel. He served his country as its fourth President from 1973 to 1978, a period that began with the Yom Kippur War and ended with the historic visit of President Sadat of Egypt to Jerusalem. A President of Israel does not participate in the day-to-day running of the country; his leadership is based on personal and moral stature rather than political involvement which is the responsibility of the Prime Minister and his cabinet. Professor Katzir looks back on his five years as President as immeasurably rich and rewarding.

For many years Ephraim Katchalski-Katzir was intensively engaged in social, educational and defense activities related to the establishment and development of the State of Israel. He played an influential part as advisor to practically every Israeli government on the shaping of national policy with regard to scientific development.

Professor Katzir is a wonderful storyteller and it is fascinating to hear him talk about Golda Meir, who was Prime Minister at the start of his Presidency to his first meeting with Anwar Sadat. Protocol dictated that as State President he be the first to welcome Sadat on his

arrival in Israel. The Sadat visit marked the beginning of the Middle-East peace process which today, 18 years later, is still under negotiation.

Ephraim Katzir was born in Kiev, Ukraine, in May 16, 1916 as the younger son of Tsila and Yehuda Katchalski. In 1922 the family immigrated to Israel from Poland. They lived in Tel Aviv and then moved to Jerusalem where Ephraim and his brother Aharon attended high school. Both brothers studied at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem where Ephraim received his masters degree in 1937 and his PhD in 1941. His pioneering work on the synthesis of poly(α -amino acids), which he designed as models for studying the structure and functions of proteins started in 1940, and his interest in natural polymers has continued throughout his life. He recognized the importance of Leuchs anhydrides for the synthesis of high molecular weight poly(α -amino acids). Another major contribution was the preparation of immobilized enzymes, which now have important and increasingly widespread applications in biotechnology.

His distinguished academic career began at Hebrew University where he was an Assistant at the Department of Theoretical and Macromolecular Chemistry from 1941-45. He spent the next two years as a Research Fellow at the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn (now Polytechnic University) and at Columbia University.

On his return to Israel in 1948, he was responsible for establishing the Department of Biophysics at the newly inaugurated Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot and headed the department from 1949 to 1973. During this period he was also a Professor of Biophysics at Hebrew University (1953-61), Guest Scientist at Harvard University (1957-59), Visiting Professor at Rockefeller University and the University of Michigan (1961-65), Senior Foreign Scientist at UCLA and Visiting Professor at the Battelle Seattle Research Center. In addition, he served as Chief Scientist at the Israel Defense Ministry (1966-68). After completing his term of office as President of Israel he returned to the Weizman Institute where he was appointed as Institute Professor in 1978. In 1980, he established the Department of Biotechnology of Tel Aviv University and served as its director and University Professor.

Ephraim Katzir's association with the Polytechnic University began early in his career. In 1947 Herman F. Mark as the head of the planning committee for the new Weizmann Institute arranged for its first consignment of sophisticated scientific equipment to be temporarily installed in the laboratories at *Brooklyn Poly*, because of the war situation in Palestine. Thus, *Brooklyn Poly* became *de facto* the precursor of the Weizmann Institute.

Common scientific interests and mutual respect led to a close association between Ephraim and Herman F. Mark. Many years later, in 1979, Professor Katzir became the first holder of the Herman F. Mark Chair at the Polytechnic University. I (OV) am proud to have succeeded Professor Katzir three years later as the full time, permanent Herman F. Mark Professor at the Polytechnic University.

Ephraim Katzir's memberships and honorary memberships of scientific bodies and societies reflecting his standing in the scientific world are too numerous to mention here in its entirety. A partial list includes the US Academy of Sciences, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Royal Society (London) and the Leopoldina Academy of Sciences in Halle. He is on the Editorial and Advisory Board of many journals.

Among his national and International recognitions and awards conferred on him for his original and inventive work and his vision in planning and organization of scientific directions are the Tchernikhovski Prize (1948), the Weizmann Prize (1950), The Israel Prize in Natural Science (1959), the Rothschild Prize in Natural Sciences (1961), the Linderstrom-Lang Gold Medal (1969), the Hans Krebs Medal (1972) and the first Japan Prize (1985). In 1990 he was appointed to the French Order of Legion d'Honneur with the rank of Commander.

The academic community has recognized Ephraim Katzir's accomplishments by awarding him honorary degrees from a large number of institutions, including the Hebrew University (1973), Brandeis University (1973), University of Michigan (1975), Polytechnic University (1975), Hebrew Union College (1975), The Weizmann Institute of Science (1976), Northwestern University (1978), Harvard University (1978), McGill University (1980), Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule, Zürich, (1980), Thomas Jefferson University (1981), University of Oxford (1981), University of Miami

(1983), Technion-Haifa Institute of Technology (1983), and Ben Gurion University of the Negev (1996).

Ephraim's older brother Aharon, also a distinguished biophysicist, was killed by terrorists at Ben Gurion Airport in May, 1972.

This article was prepared by **Otto Vogl, Herman F. Mark Professor of Polymer Science**, Polytechnic University, Brooklyn, NY and **Joseph Jagur-Grodzinski** of the Weizmann Institute of Science, Rehovot, Israel.