

George A. Olah, who won Nobel Prize in chemistry, dies at 89

March 9 2017, by John Rogers



This Dec. 9, 1994 file photo shows George A. Olah, standing third from right, and other 1994 Nobel Prize laureates posing for a group photo at the Royal Swedish Academy in Stockholm. Olah, winner of the 1994 Nobel Prize in chemistry for his groundbreaking research into the unstable carbon molecules known as carbocations, has died at age 89. The University of Southern California said Olah died Wednesday, March 8, 2017 at his Beverly Hills, Calif., home. He taught at USC for many years. (AP Photo/Gunnar Ask, File)

George A. Olah, whose work won a Nobel Prize in chemistry and paved the way for more effective oil refining and ways of producing less polluting forms of gasoline, has died at age 89.

Olah died Wednesday at his Beverly Hills home, according to the University of Southern California's Loker Hydrocarbon Research Institute, of which he was founding director. No cause of death was provided.

Olah's research brought him the 1994 Nobel Prize in chemistry for his groundbreaking study of the unstable carbon molecules known as carbocations.

"Distinguished professor George Olah was a true legend in the field of chemistry," USC President C. L. Max Nikias said in a statement Thursday. "His pioneering research fundamentally redefined the field's landscape and will influence its scholarly work for generations to come."

The Hungarian government offered its condolences for Olah, who fled Hungary during a 1950s Soviet crackdown on dissent.

"The country has lost a great patriot and one of the most outstanding figures of Hungarian scientific life," said Janos Lazar, chief of staff to Prime Minister Viktor Orban.

Olah received the Nobel Prize for his work on superacids, research that led his observation of carbocations—an unstable, fleeting chemical species that he discovered how to stabilize long enough to study its properties.

He said there was no "eureka moment" and credited the find to long hours spent in his chemistry lab, usually starting before dawn and continuing late into the night.

He also singled out for praise his longtime USC collaborator Surya Prakash, who began working with Olah in the 1970s as a 20-year-old grad student and now leads the Loker Hydrocarbon Research Institute.

Born in Budapest on May 22, 1927, Olah said he had little interest in chemistry as a youngster.

"My main interest was in the humanities, particularly history, literature, etc.," he said in a statement published on the Nobel website. "I was (and still am) (an) avid reader and believe that getting attached too early to a specific field frequently shortchanges a balanced broad education."

Instead he studied Latin for eight years as well as German, French and other languages. The son of a lawyer said he was fortunate to attend a school he called one of the best in Budapest.

It was at the Technical University of Budapest where his interest in science was finally piqued.

After earning a doctorate in organic chemistry, he went to work for the Central Research Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Science.

He was leading a research team there in 1956 when the Soviet Union cracked down on the country following the Hungarian Uprising of that year. He, his wife, their young son and most of his research team fled the country.

Eventually moving to Michigan, he began research on carbocations while employed by Dow Chemical Co. Later he taught at Cleveland's Western Reserve University before moving to USC in the late 1970s.

Honored by numerous scientific societies as well as his native country, Olah authored or co-authored nearly two dozen books and published

nearly 1,500 papers. He held 160 patents from seven countries, according to USC.

He is survived by his wife, Judith Olah, sons George and Ronald, and several grandchildren.

The university plans a campus celebration of his life at a later date.

AP writer Pablo Gorondi in Budapest contributed to this story.

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